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A Vanguard at the Intersections:
Black Girls and the Black Panther Party's Oakland Community School

by

Logan Gabrielle Phillips

Senior Thesis

Department of African & African-American Studies

Washington University in St. Louis

St. Louis, Missouri

Abstract

This thesis explores the history and legacy of the Oakland Community School (OCS), a community survival program created by the Black Panther Party (BPP) that ran from 1973-1982. More specifically, the work analyzes the significance of the pedagogy at OCS as it relates to the development of African American students' racial consciousness and identity formation. Despite popular misconceptions of the Black Panther Party, this research seeks to demystify the Party, provide an understanding of the critical need for education as a site of liberation, and explore the Party's effort to establish an educational space that impacted the development of identity, self-awareness and racial consciousness for Black girls in particular. This will also serve to broaden the discussion of Black girlhood in the late 20th century (especially in the 1970s and 1980s) as it developed in the context of educational spaces, broader urban Black communities, and the groundbreaking social movements.

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Introduction

It was the close of a long summer in East Oakland in July of 1974. The high temperatures and stifling heat came in waves and subsided very minimally with the assistance of the San Francisco Bay Estuary and Lake Merritt, which were the nearest bodies of water. Children were out in the neighborhood playing double dutch; fire hydrants running and spouting water way up high in the sky. The end of summer signaled a new season of autumn that might bring harvest. Some hoped that this new harvest would also signal the growth of the Oakland Community School (OCS). This community survival program was created by the Black Panther Party in September of 1973 and was in its second year of operating at 6118 East 14th Street. Educators, students, and community members alike were optimistic that the school would blossom even further than it had in its inaugural year. However, a couple blocks away a large crowd had gathered on the steps that had not too long before echoed tragedy. Only eight months prior, former Oakland Superintendent of Schools, Dr. Marcus Foster, had taken his last breath on these same steps. Foster's assassination had occurred while Panthers Elaine Brown and Bobby Seale were campaigning for Oakland City Council and Mayor, respectively. A part of their campaign entailed criticizing the failures of the Oakland public school system and a short time after at this high point of summer, a crowd had swelled yet again on the magnetic steps of this Oakland school board building.

With a calm, cadent, yet very direct and fervent rhetoric, Bobby Seale, co-founder of the Black Panther Party, had rallied a crowd after his proclamations to the Oakland School Board.¹ He urged the school board to stop wasting taxpayer's money and expressed complete and utter

¹ "Bobby Seale Pledges Fight to Save Oakland Schools." *The Black Panther* 11 No. 30:1-24 (July 20, 1974). San Francisco: Black Panther Party. Black Panther Productions, 1974. 1. *Black Thought and Culture Database*. Web.

disapproval of the decision put forth by the Oakland Commission on School Safety to place city police in schools. Contrary to police in schools, Seale advocated for an approach that would cultivate a “more humanistic development.” Music, dance, and drama programs for cultural awareness; kung-fu and karate for self-discipline; or even workshops for youth in vocational and employment training; Seale was clear that there were other alternatives than the “willful racist neglect” that would be instituted by bringing police into schools.² As one of the founders of this organization that had been birthed as a response to police brutality in Black neighborhoods and against oppressed peoples, outrage was nowhere near what the crowd felt reverberating from Seale’s remarks that sweltering day in July.

This decision from the city’s Commission on School Safety came right before the start of the Oakland Community School’s second year. This school, described as an “oasis in the educational desert,” aimed to meet the educational and basic living needs of Black youth in Oakland which included food, healthcare, family and student empowerment, and more.³ Though the school was free and open to the public, due to limited resources of school personnel, they did have a waitlist. Still, the educators at OCS were willing to share strategies and tips in the meantime regarding the revolutionary model of education that they were cultivating. They imagined OCS as something that could be entirely replicable because they were aware that the Party had influence not only through their affiliate chapters throughout the United States, but also on other schools in the state of California as well. Deploying city police into Oakland schools would not only inhibit any progress of other schools replicating the model of OCS, but it also went against the very core of what the Black Panther Party believed in. After a tireless summer where the Party had pushed forward on the path to liberation for a global Black struggle,

² *Ibid*

³ Oral History with Ericka Huggins 01:02:14-01:02:24

they had stumbled upon the new roadblock of keeping police out of schools. Unfortunately, this issue would escalate and be amplified beyond their sixteen-year duration.

Literature Review

A Literature Review at the Intersection: Late 20th Century Black Social Movements and the Pursuit of Education for Liberation

CIVIL RIGHTS AND BLACK POWER

The late 20th century was a time marked by a global Black struggle for liberation. It was linked by collective movements that worked to advance the social, economic, and political conditions of Black people in Africa and the diaspora. The movements include, but are not limited to, decolonization and the fight for independence on the African continent and in the Caribbean, the continued fight against Jim Crow in the southern United States, the broader Civil Rights Movement, Women's Liberation, Gay Liberation, and Black Power. The Civil Rights Movement was delineated by core themes such as universal enfranchisement, respect, desegregation and integration, and equality.⁴ Additionally, at this time a number of organizations were steering the movement such as the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

However, during the late 50s-early 60s there were two organizations in particular that were created to advance the movement's efforts towards equality: the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). The organizations that emerged during the Civil Rights Movement were unique in their own ways, but they were also united by their common grassroots organizing strategies. They promoted nonviolent direct action, a persuasive rhetoric that amplified unity on the basis of

⁴ Bedasse, Monique, and Jonathan Fenderson. "Introduction to Africana Studies." L90 AFAS 255, 11 Apr. 2019. Washington University in St. Louis. Lecture Notes.

common values, morals that every human might believe in, and groundbreaking legislation such as the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act.⁵ Accelerated by the success of the Montgomery bus boycott in 1956, the SCLC was created to coordinate the activities of southern civil rights organizations.⁶ It included prominent figures such as Bayard Rustin, James Lawson, and Martin Luther King Jr. Three years after SCLC originated, the newly formed organization of SNCC was created in an effort to organize students and young people in the United States to become involved with nonviolent direct action in the ongoing efforts to gain civil rights for Black people. SNCC was conceptualized and unified by the coordination of grassroots, civil rights, and human rights activist Ella Baker. The organization legitimized sit-ins as a method of struggle and resistance that would advance the larger goal of the collective movement.⁷ Another notable member of SNCC was Kwame Ture (Stokely Carmichael). He had become chairman of SNCC and during the latter part of his time in the organization he challenged the organization's strategy of nonviolence and interracial alliances by his proclamation of "Black Power" in June 1966 after a march led by fellow SNCC leaders in Mississippi.⁸

Coined by Ture, "Black Power" was characterized by racial pride, self-definition, self-defense, self-determination, and the pursuit of liberation.⁹ The Black Power and overarching Black nationalist movements emerged as the more traditional Civil Rights efforts were still

⁵"Civil Rights Act of 1964." *The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute*, 21 May 2018, kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/civil-rights-act-1964.; "Voting Rights Act of 1965." *The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute*, 5 June 2018, kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/voting-rights-act-1965.

⁶"Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)." *The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute*, 5 June 2018, kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/southern-christian-leadership-conference-sclc.

⁷"Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)." *The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute*, 5 June 2018, kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/student-nonviolent-coordinating-committee-sncc.

⁸"Carmichael, Stokely." *The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute*, 21 May 2018, kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/carmichael-stokely.

⁹ Bedasse, Monique, and Jonathan Fenderson. "Introduction to Africana Studies." L90 AFAS 255, 11 Apr. 2019. Washington University in St. Louis. Lecture Notes.

occurring. Black Power shifted away from centering nonviolence and integration as prominent strategies to organize the masses and focused more on the politics of power and liberation. Emerging organizations that were inspired by this set of political ideas included the Black Liberation Army (BLA), the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM), and the Black Panther Party (BPP). Founded in 1966 by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, the Black Panther Party was an organization inspired especially by the rhetoric of Black Power. The Party made an effort to politicize oppressed people and form a global coalition for class struggle under the guise of Black Power. They emphasized the issue of police brutality in Black communities especially and upheld a stance of self-defense. Although they had different approaches to political organizing in addition to the distinct ideologies under which area they fell within the broader Black struggle, the BPP and SNCC were similar in that these two organizations were fertile grounds for the rise in community participation, political leadership, radical education and grassroots organizing efforts of Black women in particular.

WOMEN'S LIBERATION

The movement for Women's Liberation was also making significant strides in the late 20th century, but it expanded to new heights in a way that it had not done so before. Advocacy for women's rights and women's participation in social movements in the United States spans the entire course of American history. Their participation showed up in a variety of areas such as slavery abolition, women's rights and suffragettes, and the women's club movement. By the 1960s, the movement reemerged after witnessing the success of the Civil Rights Movement and found its place under the umbrella of second wave feminism. This contemporary period for feminist organizing propelled the mission beyond voting rights to pursue rights and opportunities in areas such as domestic violence, sexuality, and work for women. In spite of this new wave,

this “contemporary” fight for women’s rights remained steadfast in its marginalization of Black women and other women of color.

There were broader intersections of race, gender, and class, also noted as “triple jeopardy”, that the broader feminist movement failed to consider, and it had been dominated by white women.¹⁰ The consideration of this triple jeopardy among other layers such as sexuality, ability, and more made the development of a feminist consciousness for Black women quite different and closer to that of Black feminism. It is important to note too, that the legacy of Black women raising awareness via their activism, politics, and lives in general also had roots that stemmed back prior to the 1960s. Additionally, some of the issues and sentiments that guided what white women were advocating for via the larger feminist movement did not always impact Black women in the same way. For example, leadership. The Women’s Liberation movement and others had gained inspiration from the strong organizing presence of figures in the Civil Rights Movement and particularly, Black women. Organizers like Ella Baker in SNCC and Fannie Lou Hamer of the Freedom Democratic Party were among many of the Black women who were extremely influential for their community activism and political organizing work, both before and during the emergence of the social movements in the 60s.¹¹ This is not to say that there were no differences or splits within Black feminism in and of itself, nor is it necessarily characterizing these Black women solely as feminists; but it provides a relevant framework that is necessary to consider when understanding identity politics in Black Power and the Black Panther Party especially.

¹⁰ McDuffie, Erik S. *Sojourning for Freedom: Black Women, American Communism, and the Making of Black Left Feminism*. Duke University Press, 2011. pp. 4

¹¹ “Hamer, Fannie Lou.” *The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute*, 22 May 2018, kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/hamer-fannie-lou.

Additionally, from the standpoint of Black women, their consciousness had been developing amidst the many moving parts of their identities and experiences. Though they may not have explicitly aligned with feminism (read: *white* feminism), they were still aware of their gendered experiences in other activist spaces especially in the Civil Rights Movement and eventually the Black Power movement. Many purported that it was an issue of ultimatum where Black women had to decide if they would align with the larger movement that centered race, or the other that centered gender. Yet the entire time, both issues and then some were being discussed and theoretical frameworks were being formulated based on the knowledge and lived experiences of Black women and other women of color.

Gender politics certainly showed up for women in spaces such as Black Power as well. Though Black Power was characterized by ideologies such as self-determination, racial pride, and self-defense, it was also viewed by many through a masculinist lens. The images of guns, and men in leather jackets and berets dominated the media and sensationalized the broader society's perception of who could assert and align with Black Power. However, many leaders aimed to combat this message by asserting the inclusion and uplift of women as political actors. In addition to their roles as political actors and organizers, the rhetoric of Black Power was also broadened by women to focus on core issues that were necessary for people's survival, including things like social services, adequate housing, employment, and better schools.¹² This progressive lens was not put into practice immediately, nor was it adopted by every person or organization. It was the aim but shifting the governing ethos of what people had been conditioned to think about the politics of issues like race or gender was a challenging process and similar to the revolution, it was ongoing. These emerging ideologies and analyses were advocating for change, but they

¹² Fenderson, Jonathan. "Feminist Fire!: Radical Black Women in the 20th Century." L90 AFAS 3002, 19 Mar. 2019. Washington University in St. Louis. Lecture Notes.

were also pushing against deeply rooted beliefs and lived experiences that some people had only ever known.

THE RISE OF INDEPENDENT BLACK EDUCATION

Education as a tool for social change, political awareness, mass organizing, and more broadly a path to liberation was embraced by many of the same political and social activists that were prominent in the ongoing movements of the 1960s. It was encouraged most visibly in communities that were connected by geographical location. For example, there were training sessions to raise awareness about organizing strategies for nonviolent, direct action sit-ins executed by Civil Rights organizations in the South. These sessions would include activities such as instruction about what to do and what not to do so that any excuse for retaliation was minimal or nonexistent; consideration of the number of participants needed to occupy a particular target site; or building the capacity to recover from any violating acts such as spitting or insultingly aggressive comments. Activists could not go into any space without a properly informed strategy because any loose end could weaken their united stance and potentially harm them.

In the realm of education and Civil Rights, women were very attuned to the issues and influential in the conversations during this time. As previously mentioned, Ella Baker was the brains behind the creation of SNCC. She infused her politics around participatory democracy which shifted the focus of activism from only emphasizing hierarchical leadership to that which would amplify direct action, collective leadership and grassroots organizing.¹³ Fannie Lou Hamer was in the NAACP, SNCC, and SCLC. She was well known for her organizing work in the Mississippi Democratic Freedom Party and also through her work in the focus areas of civic

¹³ “Baker, Ella Josephine.” *The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute*, 4 Aug. 2020, kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/baker-ella-josephine.

education, political involvement, enfranchisement, and women's rights.¹⁴ Septima Clark, a member of NAACP and SCLC, was a Civil Rights activist who was notable especially as it relates to education. She was an elementary teacher whose activism was driven by her collaborative work with the Citizenship Schools that explored creative approaches to community-based political engagement for Black people.¹⁵ Lastly, Marion Wright Edelman, another member of NAACP and SCLC, was notable because she would eventually organize the Children's Defense Fund which implemented a modern take on Freedom Schools for children facing poverty.¹⁶ These women were among the many who were instrumental in building the lineage of educational projects for Black people and children that emerged during the Civil Rights Movement.

Within the framework of Black Power, political education was also a critical tool utilized to organize the masses. However, they often included different class-based ideologies and theories such as Marxism or Socialism to frame their pedagogy within a deeper analysis that considered class, a more global struggle, and the issue of power and oppression. The Black Panther Party in particular voiced their stance on the need for better education for Black people and all oppressed people via Point 5 of their Ten Point-Party Platform. The economic stability of Black people in the United States had been systematically weakened by a number of factors and one in particular that also impacted education was segregation. The amplification of poverty was rampant and rooted in many of the injustices that Black people face and with the BPP focusing especially on the issues of poverty and class, the Party was well aware of this.

¹⁴ "Hamer, Fannie Lou." *The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute*, 22 May 2018, kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/hamer-fannie-lou.

¹⁵ "Clark, Septima Poinsette." *The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute*, 4 Aug. 2020, kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/clark-septima-poinsette.

¹⁶ "Poor People's Campaign." *The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute*, 5 June 2018, kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/poor-peoples-campaign.

Black children who lived in inner cities were most often attending public schools during this time. The enactment of *Brown v. Board (1954)* and the residual effects of racist housing policies that had been instituted to enforce redlining and zoning meant that, depending on their location, these public schools would be seriously at risk of being underfunded, under resourced, and chronically inadequate regarding the quality of education for Black youth.¹⁷ Thus, the quest for an alternative radical education for Black youth ensued. This manifested via community educational programs and independent Black schools. Educational initiatives created under the framework of Black Power were especially characterized by this programmatic expression through their “attempts to transcend rhetoric and create enduring mechanisms of consciousness and resistance” for youth, rather than being solely based in identity or symbolism without politics as many might assume.¹⁸ This ultimately worked to bridge the gap between schools and the communities that they were located in. Among their different educational programs, the BPP as a prominent organization aligned with Black Power, was very adamant about the need for children to have a better education and after researching past educational pioneers such as the women from the Civil Rights Movement and other notable educational philosophers that aligned with the Party’s ideology such as Paulo Freire, the Party embarked upon the journey of creating the Oakland Community School.

Significance of the Study

For this project, I am studying the history and legacy of the Oakland Community School (OCS), a community survival program created by the Black Panther Party (BPP) that ran from

¹⁷ “Introduction: Education, Black Power, and the Radical Imagination.” *We Are An African People: Independent Education, Black Power, and the Radical Imagination*, by Russell John Rickford, Oxford University Press, 2019, pp. 7

¹⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 6

1973-1982. More specifically, my project explores the significance of the pedagogy at OCS as it relates to the development of African American students' racial consciousness and identity formation. My project seeks to answer the following question: *How did the pedagogy, ideology, and practices of OCS and its educators influence the identity formation and racial consciousness of Black girls who attended the school?* Emerging out of Point 5 of the Black Panther Party's (BPP) 10 Point Program, OCS was more than just a temporary institution, as it served a deeper role for youth in the area. The pedagogy at OCS reflected a belief that education could serve as a revolutionary site of liberation.

Due to the interdisciplinary nature of my research topic, it impacts scholarly conversations on research, policy, and practice as they pertain to the education of African Americans. Growing out of a specific niche in the history of education and Black Studies and Women and Gender Studies, my project explores connections between educational practices and the development of identity, self-awareness and racial consciousness for Black girls in particular. This will also serve to broaden the discussion of Black girlhood in the late 20th century (especially in the 1970s and 1980s) as it developed in the context of education spaces, broader urban Black communities, and the groundbreaking social movements. There has been research conducted to analyze racial consciousness and identity formation among Black people and students more broadly, but none thus far have looked at this school in this particular manner. This project is also significant because it will add to the field's efforts to demystify the historical impact and purpose of the Black Panther Party by looking through the lens of their educational projects. With emerging research done on OCS, most scholarship focuses on the school primarily from an educational standpoint (pedagogy, curriculum, etc.) but there has been limited

exploration of the school's impact on students' experiences via their identity formation and racial consciousness in tandem with the educational environment.

I hope to also problematize the idea of education simply being a mindless act where students go to school just to advance in life. Instead, the project shows the potential and promise of education as it relates to the growth and development of one's sense of self. This commitment to making sure that students had "knowledge of self" was very pertinent not only within the BPP's Point 5, but it guided how teachers taught, how they interacted with students, as well as how they interacted with one another in the surrounding community. The project will also seek to understand why politicized African Americans have historically understood education to be more than just a pedagogical tool to learn and advance into society. It has been and continues to be a site of resistance, liberation, and self-discovery. This body of work will also disprove the idea that the school was merely a site of indoctrination for the Party's political mission. Instead, adults at the school made an effort to foster an environment where a child would become racially aware and empowered while also receiving the general core subjects of American education and other specialized courses. Ultimately, the project seeks to understand the power of having a holistic approach to educating a child.

Methodology

I began my research with an extensive review of secondary sources such as books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and browsing digital archival sources such as Stanford University's Martin Luther King Jr. Papers Project, the It's About Time: Black Panther Party Legacy and Alumni Archive, and the University of California at Berkeley's The Berkeley Revolution Archive. Upon a review of existing literature on the Black Panther Party, women in the Party, and the Oakland Community School, a number of trends emerged and were covered extensively.

Research on the Black Panther party has widened since the Party's end in 1982, and the history has expanded to demystify the impact of the Party by highlighting its rich legacy of political organizing and political education. Contrary to popular belief, they were not a simple-minded cadre of armed revolutionaries. Though Black Power, militancy, and coalition spearheaded the growth of the Party in its early years, their strategic organizing, deep analysis of different theoretical frameworks, and their commitment to building coalitions strengthened their influence. Scholarly works such as Philip S. Foner's *The Black Panthers Speak* and Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin's *Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* detailed the historiography and politics of the Party. There is literature on the tradition of independent Black schools created in the 19th and 20th centuries and this includes some exploration of those aligned with the Black Power such as Oakland Community School. Works such as Charles M. Payne and Carol Strickland's *Teach Freedom: Education for Liberation in the African-American Tradition* and Russell Rickford's *We Are An African People: Independent Education, Black Power, and the Radical Imagination* informed the perspective of the historical tradition of alternative sites of education created intentionally for Black youth. Furthermore, research on women in the Party has expanded since the late 1990s as well through the work of scholars such as Angela LeBlanc-Ernest through her co-authored chapter with Ericka Huggins in *Want to Start a Revolution?: Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle* and a myriad of other publications; Robyn C. Spencer's *The Revolution Has Come: Black Power, Gender and the Black Panther Party in Oakland*; Ashley D. Farmer's *Remaking Black Power: How Black Women Transformed an Era*; and Elaine Brown via her autobiography *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story*. Lastly, information on the Party's community survival programs have

been researched and noted by scholars, with emerging information on the Oakland Community School.¹⁹

My research has also been informed by primary sources including *The Black Panther* newspaper accessed by Alexander Street's Black Thought and Culture and oral history interviews with former students and educators. Overall, the interviews sought to gain insight regarding the experiences of Black women who were educators/administrators and Black women who were young elementary students (read: Black girls) at the time of OCS's existence. These interviews provide an actual account of student experiences, a deeper understanding of the role of OCS in the greater Oakland area, and their perspectives on the role that educators played in the identity formation and racial consciousness of former students. Additionally, these oral histories provide insight into the experiences and perspectives of Panther women whose leadership was important to the Party and within community survival programs such as OCS as well as their views on the school's legacy.

This thesis asserts that Oakland Community School through its pedagogy, ideology, and practices, as well as the presence of Panther women in leadership at the school and in the Party at large, influenced the identity formation of young Black girls at the school especially by the cultivation of their racial consciousness, sense of self, and leadership efficacy. Chapter One historicizes the Black Panther Party, details the influence of women in the Party, and accentuates the fact that women were a driving force in the Party as a whole and also through the Party's community survival programs. Chapter Two details the role of Point 5 in the development of the

¹⁹ Hilliard, David and Dr. Huey P. Newton Foundation. *The Black Panther Party: Service to the People Programs*. University of New Mexico Press, 2008.; *It's About Time - Black Panther Party Legacy & Alumni*, www.itsabouttimebpp.com/index_PhotoGallery.html.; Nelson, Alondra. *Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight Against Medical Discrimination*. University of Minnesota Press, 2011.

BPP's educational initiatives and explores the roots of Oakland Community School's pedagogy, ideology, and practices. Chapter Three analyzes the role of community at OCS. This includes the learning community within OCS and the greater Oakland community that OCS was situated in. It highlights not only the importance of strong school and community relations, but it also details the strong ties between OCS staff members and students as well as students' families. Chapter Four explores how even amidst OCS's progressive, community-centered approach to addressing social identities in the educational environment, students who attended the school as young Black girls were impacted in ways that influenced their individual identity formation especially through the cultivation of their racial consciousness, sense of self, and leadership efficacy.

Oral Histories Overview

The core of the research for this thesis stems from several oral history interviews that I conducted over the last year. I interviewed four Black women between September 2020 and February 2021; three former Oakland Community School students and one former OCS instructor. Each interview ranged from 1 to 2.5 hours. Questions were developed to get a sense of 1) the interviewee's background 2) their experience at OCS/with the BPP 3) perception of OCS's impact in the Oakland Community 4) their past and current sense of self, history, and place in society 5) the perceived impact of OCS on their identity formation 6) their educational experience after OCS and 7) their perspectives on the current state of the U.S. education system today.

Ericka Suzanne is a former OCS student. She was born and raised in Los Angeles and grew up in Beverly Hills. Formerly managing an art studio for artists with severe disabilities, Suzanne is a large proponent of the arts and wears many hats. She is an alumna of Spelman College, art exhibit curator, writer/author, and researcher for a news network. Her autobiography

Black Panther Princess is set for release in 2021. Ericka is also the daughter of Elaine Brown and Raymond “Masai” Hewitt, two former leading members of the Black Panther Party.

Kesha Hackett is a former OCS Student. She is an Aquarius. She has worked in Human Resources (HR) for 25 years. Hackett attended a local university, University of San Francisco, and received her bachelor’s degree in Organizational Behavior and Leadership. She then went on to pursue her master’s degree in HR Management. Hackett has been in the Bay area all of her life but has moved around a lot. As a mother and board member for a mental health advocacy nonprofit and for the National Association of African Americans in HR Hackett remains passionate about advocacy, relating to the community, and giving back.

Dr. Leilah Armour Kirkendoll is a former OCS Student. Dr. Leilah Armour Kirkendoll is an educator. She was formerly a teacher for 10 years and has currently been in administration for 15 years. She is a wife, a mother, a minister, an advocate, and coach. Dr. Kirkendoll was born in Los Angeles, raised in Oakland, and moved between San Diego and Los Angeles to close out her high school career. She attended San Diego State University (SDSU) for her bachelor’s and master’s degrees. She then continued her education by pursuing her teaching and administrative credentials from Cal State, San Marcos and the National University (CA) respectively. Kirkendoll continued further to pursue her PhD in Leadership Studies from the University of San Diego. Dr. Kirkendoll and her husband have a marriage ministry. Lastly, she is a girl scout leader, cheer coach, member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., and an advisor for the Sorority’s undergraduate chapter at SDSU. Kirkendoll is also the daughter of two former members of the Black Panther Party.

Ericka Huggins is a former OCS educator and member of the Black Panther Party. Huggins grew up in southeast Washington, D.C., as the oldest of three children. A lot of her

growth in awareness about how structural racism works especially through the lens of race, class, and gender is rooted in the stories and lessons that her mother provided Huggins and her siblings as children. She mentioned that although they didn't have that language at the time, her mother was instrumental in her foundational awareness of the real-life manifestations of structural racism that impacted the daily lives of their family. At age 15, Huggins attended the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. The experience of what she saw, heard, and felt at the March inspired her to make a vow to serve people for the rest of her life. Despite difficulties, she has remained steadfast in keeping that vow. Huggins also attended Lincoln University in Philadelphia, PA, and later received her Master's in Sociology. Huggins believes she is who she is because of where she comes from, what she learned, and what she understands. Huggins also noted that she is always learning and unlearning things that she was taught as well.

Chapter 1:

The BPP and Black Women in the Revolutionary Vanguard

On September 15, 1973 there was a fresh, new building at 6118 East 14th Street in the heart of Oakland's Black working-class community.²⁰ The Intercommunal Youth Institute had finally opened its doors at a new location. The move was a result of their increased enrollment and interest which caused the school to exceed its capacity at the prior location. Created as the Children's House in 1970 by the Black Panther Party, the school represented a revolutionary manifestation of Point 5 of the Party's Ten Point Program which advocated for "an education for our people that exposes the true nature of the decadent American society."²¹ They wanted an education that would teach "the true history" and Black people in the present-day society because they believed in an educational system that would give people a knowledge of self. Despite being gendered in a masculine way, they believed that "if a man does not have knowledge of himself and his position in society and the world, then he has little chance to relate to anything else."²² This "true history" would be incorporated in order to provide people with a broader and more analytical account of what actually occurred in America's history, especially regarding the systemic roots of oppression that Black people and other groups faced due to their systematic lack of power in society. This "true history" would be stripped of the dominant whitewashed, American exceptionalist narrative that had persisted for so long. Providing this "true history" worked to bolster people's knowledge of self by raising the awareness of one's

²⁰ "Youth Institute Opens." *The Black Panther* 10 No. 18:1-19 (September 15, 1973). San Francisco: Black Panther Party. Black Panther Productions, 1973. 12-13. Black Thought and Culture Database. Web.

²¹ Bloom, Joshua, and Waldo E. Martin. *Black against Empire: the History and Politics of the Black Panther Party: with a New Preface*. University of California Press, 2016. pp. 71-72

²² *Ibid.*

individual identity, thoughts, and beliefs in an effort to ultimately reveal an understanding of their relation to and position within the context of society at large.

Documented by *The Black Panther*, the official newspaper of the Party, the school had a potential to reach even more members of the local Oakland community. This paper had the very powerful role of spreading the news and experiences of the Party's political agenda and ideals, but also the news and experiences of community members. It provided a chance to tell the full story of interactions between police and community members in addition to the broader happenings of the local, national, and global events in the world. It played a powerful role in offering a more comprehensive narrative of Oakland and the mission of the Party. Reinforced by word of mouth, the newspaper also communicated information about the Party's community survival programs which included over 65 different initiatives to meet the needs of the local Oakland community. The programs offered a myriad of resources ranging from free medical treatment, sickle cell anemia testing, free shoes and clothing, and free busing to prisons for families of incarcerated individuals, just to name a few. Oakland Community School was one of the many community survival programs implemented by the Party and it was also the program that lasted the longest. These programs served to be an extraordinary example of the Party's commitment to the people that also represented an ideological shift in focus for the Party which occurred during a period where the leadership of the Central Committee was composed predominantly of Panther women.

The newspaper's announcement of the new building location inherently signified that the Oakland Community School was very important within the educational arena of the Oakland area. Educators at OCS were doing something innovative and impactful regarding students' educational and personal potential that was not happening elsewhere in the public school system.

The goal of the school was to center Black children in an environment that provided tools to survive in society and they hoped to teach children *how* to think rather than *what* to think. The curriculum included subjects like science, art, multicultural history, and physical education and the school overall was intended to serve as a model to the “Oakland public schools as well as other people who wished to implement community-based schools.”²³ This amplified the fact that it was not just an educational model that they were hoping to keep as a jewel within Oakland. It was purposely created as something that could be replicated. Understanding Point 5 in tandem with the Party’s beliefs in a global consciousness and intercommunal solidarity, the Panthers recognized that Black children in Oakland needed a more community-based education that was rooted in their humanity and their ability to think critically about the world in which they lived. They also recognized the children of oppressed communities nationally and globally could benefit from the model. The school, along with other community survival programs which emerged under the majority leadership of Panther women, was created based on the needs voiced by the community and collectively aligned with the framework of the Party’s Ten-Point Program. In addition to their presence at the executive level, women were also instrumental to the efforts and overall success of the Black Panther Party’s community survival programs and this only amplified the fact that women were the backbone of the political organization.

Origins of the Black Panther Party

Based in the city of Oakland, California, the Black Panther Party was founded in 1966 by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale. The Party was localized in a place filled with a rich history of organizing within and for the Black working class. In line with the patterns of the ongoing Great

²³ "Youth Institute Opens." *The Black Panther* 10 No. 18:1-19 (September 15, 1973). San Francisco: Black Panther Party. Black Panther Productions, 1973. 12-13. Black Thought and Culture Database. Web.

Migration of Blacks from the Southern United States to areas of the North, East, Midwest, and Far west, the end of World War II marked an influx of geographical relocation for Black people to Oakland. There were “thousands of African Americans [who] migrated to Oakland from Louisiana, Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and other southern states.”²⁴ Big cities were the primary destinations for Black southerners due to the high levels of economic and employment opportunity. For states in the West in particular, cities like Los Angeles, San Francisco, Oakland, Seattle, and Portland were popular spots that were refuges for Black migrants. With an overall net increase of 32.5%, Oakland was by far one of the locations with the highest recorded increase in percent-point change of a city’s respective Black population between 1910-1970.²⁵ Migrants from the South grew to have a special influence on the racial politics in Oakland.²⁶ As a result of their common destination of Oakland and shared experiences, the Black residents of Oakland were presented with a remarkably fertile ground where social ties were being created on the basis of shared values, beliefs, and customs in their neighborhoods, while they were simultaneously facing the increasingly alarming issue of racial discrimination in those same neighborhoods. Marked by a sort of antithetical balance of forming community relations in the face of rising racial discrimination, Black residents in Oakland faced this deeply rooted racism in particular through social institutions and issues such as housing, education, poverty, and police brutality.²⁷

With the emergence of the Black Panther Party in the late 1960s, Texas and Louisiana are two important locations regarding the story of Black migration in the United States. Newton’s

²⁴ Spencer, Robyn C. *The Revolution Has Come: Black Power, Gender, and the Black Panther Party in Oakland*. Duke University Press, 2016. pp. 7

²⁵ The Website Services & Coordination Staff, US Census Bureau. “The Great Migration, 1910 to 1970.” *U.S. Census*, 1 Mar. 1994, www.census.gov/dataviz/visualizations/020/

²⁶ Spencer, Robyn C. *The Revolution Has Come: Black Power, Gender, and the Black Panther Party in Oakland*. Duke University Press, 2016. pp. 8

²⁷ *Ibid.*

family originated from Louisiana and Seale's family originated from Texas. As young adults living in postwar Oakland, Newton and Seale recognized the impact of this postwar demobilization through a different lens because it had disproportionately affected working-class Blacks, loosening the grasp of economic security that they had in shipbuilding and other defense industries and relocating them within the newly formed auto industry.²⁸ Though they were two young college students at Merritt College in Oakland, Newton and Seale stood on the shoulders of giants who knew that this "postwar period would radicalize [this] new generation of activists who were, literally and figuratively, their children."²⁹ Mobilized by the ongoing climate of state-sanctioned violence against Black people at the local, national, and global level in addition to the more specific aspect of ongoing police brutality and harassment against Black people, Newton and Seale set out to create an organization that would defend the Black community while also emphasizing solidarity by strategizing an organized way to confront the ongoing struggle that Black people faced. They hoped to transform the conditions of Black people worldwide while also advocating for self-defense that would go beyond what most had experienced before.

The two students merged the Black nationalist paradigms with understandings derived from their study of Malcolm X whose "words resonated with many young Blacks, especially those in the ghettos who had not seen the Civil Rights Movement bring any noticeable change in their condition."³⁰ They saw a gap within the Civil Rights Movement and its limited reach beyond the South especially in the North and the West. According to Bloom & Martin, "even in its heyday in the early 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement never significantly challenged de facto,

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 29

or customary, economic and political exclusion in the black ghettos of the North and West”³¹ Newton and Seale set out to embark upon a mission that would have theory and practice work in tandem with one another, rather than just being one or the other as many organizations and people they deemed, “armchair revolutionaries” did at that time. Additionally, they “turned to Marxist theorists at home and abroad to explain the poverty they saw all around them.”³² They borrowed from Marxist theorists that included, but were not limited to, Frantz Fanon, Mao Zedong, Che Guevara, and Vladimir Lenin. The theorists provided the framework for not only the Party itself, but also the ideas about class struggle, nationalism, and revolution that the two men had woven into the Ten-Point Program which served as the guiding platform for the Party. The Ten-Point Program was one of “radical reform rooted in the nexus between visceral lived experiences of discrimination in Oakland’s flatlands and the strong sense of connection with forces of radical social change around the country and the world.”³³ Through their patrol of the police and their informed political stance on their right to bear arms as a means of self-defense, the Panthers were able to remain committed to their goal of being an organization that organized through action in addition to theory.

Party membership originally consisted of local community members; veterans of Oakland’s Civil Rights Movement, student activists, high school students, former members of national organizations, and what many would classify as the common man. At the very heart of their membership was “...urban Black youth who refused to be broken by the policeman’s baton, refused to defer the authority of a racist state apparatus, and refused the fundamentally skewed

³¹ Bloom, Joshua, and Waldo E. Martin. *Black against Empire: the History and Politics of the Black Panther Party: with a New Preface*. University of California Press, 2016. pp. 25

³² Spencer, Robyn C. *The Revolution Has Come: Black Power, Gender, and the Black Panther Party in Oakland*. Duke University Press, 2016. pp. 30

³³ *Ibid.* pp. 32

logic of American capitalism.”³⁴ Aiming to expand and include those who felt left behind by the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Panther Party created a new political organizing space that really tackled and addressed the issue of class. The Black Panther Party eventually drew in membership interest from people locally, nationally and internationally, and they “were united by their sense of purpose, collective identity, and commitment to seize the time”³⁵

Gender in the Party

The strength of solidarity that was built through their effort towards a collective class struggle was enhanced through the Party’s consideration of another intersectional identity: gender. Although the popular discourse says otherwise, “the issue of gender, the role of women in the Party, and the idealized notion of Black manhood continue[d] to be significant points of interest and analysis when it comes to the Panthers.”³⁶ There was a dominating image of macho appeal and militancy that had taken flight after some time and it functioned to mask the reality of the organization's ongoing internal struggle against sexism and awareness of gender politics. Leaders of the Party, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale initially embraced an unspoken, yet performed militant masculism. The appeal to masculinity influenced the local community’s perception of the Party and steered the Party’s initial membership base to be largely composed of young men. However, the Black Panther Party quickly aimed to embrace and uplift the belief that the Party was not intended to be an exclusive space. Women were also viewed as individuals

³⁴ Foner, Philip Sheldon. *The Black Panthers Speak*. Lippincott, 1970. pp. x

³⁵ Spencer, Robyn C. *The Revolution Has Come: Black Power, Gender, and the Black Panther Party in Oakland*. Duke University Press, 2016. pp. 9

³⁶ Foner, Philip Sheldon. *The Black Panthers Speak*. Lippincott, 1970. pp. xiii

who could be comrades and political change makers and “they theorised about the need for strong manhood but didn’t counter that with descriptions of submissive womanhood.”³⁷

Class struggle, self-defense, self-determination, and global solidarity intersected with gender; it was not a separate issue that could be tossed aside. There was an appeal for Black women to join the Party specifically because they “faced issues of poverty and political powerlessness similar to those Black men faced and felt the same desire to do something.”³⁸ Members tended to be quite young, ranging from their late teens to mid-twenties on average, and this made the experience of being in the Party one where individuals were both coming of age and growing into their own while also growing to understand their own politics. For young Black women in particular, this also happened to be a time where they had “come to political consciousness in the context of the growing women’s movement and the public dialogue about women’s equality, rights, and liberation.”³⁹ The mid-1960s was a significant time where there was an ongoing struggle for women’s liberation. There was a resistance to the Victorian ethics of “true womanhood” that focused on things like piety, chastity, and submissiveness; and Black women in particular shifted to uplifting their struggle with both the race problem and the woman question. Though Black women had been organizing long before the 60s, this time in particular was also filled with an effort to define for themselves what womanhood and feminism looked like.

This rise of the Black Power movement occurred during the postwar period that was also coming off the heels of the 1965 Moynihan Report which was a take on the “culture of poverty” in the United States. Daniel Patrick Moynihan argued that the rising increase of Black matriarchs

³⁷ Spencer, Robyn C. *The Revolution Has Come: Black Power, Gender, and the Black Panther Party in Oakland*. Duke University Press, 2016. pp. 46

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

as the heads of Black households was detrimental to the “progress of the group as a whole, and impose[d] a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well.”⁴⁰ The report linked welfare dependency to the behavior of people facing poverty in the Black community. There was a pathology attributed to Black families, and especially Black women, in American cities due to the rise in single mother households, increase in births out of wedlock, and a rise in welfare dependency. This cycle of poverty was assumed to be at the fault of the changing dynamics of the Black family structure. The rhetoric of class was heavily racialized and gendered during the 1960s, with the War on Poverty going on as well. Terms like “welfare” and “crime” were racially coded and immediately brought forth connotations of deeply embedded racial stereotypes that were deemed Black and female.

This report was also leaked only a year after Kwame Ture’s comments about the role of women volunteers in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) being “prone.” The Party as a collective itself did try to actively work towards combating the rhetoric of sexist beliefs and supposed roles when discussing gender, women’s ability, and their commitment to fight in the ongoing revolution. No one was afraid to discuss gender and Panther women often “engaged in extensive conversations over how to best conceptualize womanhood in the party and society at large.”⁴¹ The discussion of gender was not solely confined to circles of women in the Party and there were men who engaged in advocating for and against manifestations of patriarchal, male chauvinist biases that implied any sense of women being inferior. However, women’s voices regarding the shifting dynamics of gender were most prominent, central to the discussion, and are very important to highlight. Though the BPP never officially adopted

⁴⁰ “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action.” *U.S. Department of Labor Seal*, www.dol.gov/general/aboutdol/history/webid-moynihan.

⁴¹ Farmer, Ashley D. *Remaking Black Power: How Black Women Transformed an Era*. University of North Carolina Press, 2019. pp. 51

feminism as one of their official theoretical frameworks for organizing, “Panther ideas and symbolism may have both inhibited and ignited radical Black feminist (or womanist) consciousness and actions.”⁴²

Many women who were members of the Party (or fellow travelers) such as Angela Davis, June Jordan, and others “trace their political lineage, in part, to a critical engagement with the politics and practices of the BPP.”⁴³ Even though women may not have immediately identified with or claimed the explicit label feminist, they did recognize that issues of sexism were inherently woven throughout their experiences just as much as race and class and they worked to “[integrate] feminist principles into their visions of revolutionary womanhood.”⁴⁴ Party member and past chairman Elaine Brown documented in her memoir how she felt that feminism was reserved for white women and initially felt that capitalism and racism were the primary issues to focus on; sexism was secondary. Yet after looking back on her experiences, she shifted her mindset and declared: “the feminists were right. The value of my life had been obliterated as much by being female as by being Black and poor. Racism and sexism in America were equal partners in my oppression.”⁴⁵ Brown came to understand this during her tenure as Chairman of the Party from 1974-1977 and a couple years prior when she was running for Oakland’s City Council. In this particular case, she had been dealing with backlash from men who had been upset with her appointments in different leadership roles in the Party after she assumed the role of Chairman. These leadership appointments caused some comrades to be upset because of a particular aspect of the appointees’ identity: they were women.

⁴² Foner, Philip Sheldon. *The Black Panthers Speak*. Lippincott, 1970. pp. xiii

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Farmer, Ashley D. *Remaking Black Power: How Black Women Transformed an Era*. University of North Carolina Press, 2019. pp. 72

⁴⁵ Brown, Elaine. *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story*. Anchor Books, 1992. pp. 367

Brown valued women and their ability to lead effectively, efficiently, and in a manner that would get things done. What she realized though was that not only were many of the members who identified as men threatened by her position in leadership as Chairman, but also her decisions in Party leadership appointments. Power was central to the global fight for Black Power and the fight for all oppressed peoples, but it was also gendered when it came to individuals' response to and acceptance of leadership. When considering gender within the Party and the larger fight for liberation through organizing, it was clear that “even men who were themselves oppressed wanted power over women.”⁴⁶ Brown's “taste of power” was one of movement leadership that steered the membership of an extremely influential political organization that was a part of the global fight to dismantle the structures that oppressed so many people and their communities.

With Brown assuming the role of Chairman of the Black Panther Party, this meant that she was the second-ranking member of the Central Committee. Huey Newton, who at the time was still Minister of Defense the first-ranking member of the Party, was in exile by this time and the Central Committee, rank-and-file, and general membership had to answer to Brown. In this role, Elaine had become the “supreme power over the most militant organization in America” and she saw this in sharp contrast to the typical role of women in the Party and women in the overall schema of the Black Power movement.⁴⁷ Brown reflected upon the shifting dynamics and impact of her assuming the role of Chairman when she detailed that:

A woman in the Black Power movement was considered, at best irrelevant. A woman asserting herself was a pariah. A woman attempting the role of leadership was, to my proud Black Brothers, making an alliance with the “counter-revolutionary, man-hating, lesbian, feminist white bitches.” It was a violation of some Black Power principle that was left undefined. If a Black woman assumed a role of leadership, she was said to be

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 3

eroding Black manhood, to be hindering the progress of the Black race. She was an enemy of Black people.⁴⁸

The very notion of a woman undertaking a role of leadership being seen as something that destabilized Black manhood and obstructed the advancement of Black people as a whole not only mirrored society's wildly popular and pathological ethos that had emerged regarding Black women, but it was amplified it within the realm of Black Power, social movements, and revolutionary organizations. Yet the very reality of women and their roles in activism both within the BPP and externally within society at large proved this ideal wrong.

Another aspect of the discourse on womanhood that was mirrored within the gender dynamics of women in the Party was the issue of motherhood. Due to the Party's attempts to go against the overarching societal trend of sexism, male chauvinism, and stereotypical gender "roles," becoming a mother was not something that was expected for all women to be interested in. Yet, they ensured that it would certainly not be viewed as something that would be a handicap or deficit and "female members developed an expansive political identity that integrated Black mothers and caregivers into the party's revolutionary fold."⁴⁹ Women embraced the sense of militancy characterized by the political, social, and cultural force that was Black Power. However, in addition to the militancy, they were also strong-willed in their efforts to challenge society's viewpoint that upheld maternalism. Contrary to society's strongly held belief in the inferiority on the basis of race, gender, and motherhood, Black women during this time often pushed against any stereotypical ideologies about the supposedly assigned socio-political locations and spaces in which women could maneuver throughout and make change in. They remained vocal, visible, and present members in community organizing and motherhood was not

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 357

⁴⁹ Farmer, Ashley D. *Remaking Black Power: How Black Women Transformed an Era*. University of North Carolina Press, 2019. pp. 77

as something that would stifle their resistance. Thus, if a woman made the decision to pursue motherhood, it functioned as a radical tool to “[divest] Black women of their domestic markers and cast them as self-defined and self-determining activists” rather than something that would inhibit them in the revolution.⁵⁰

Emergence of the Party’s Community Survival Programs

By the early 1970s, the BPP’s focus shifted toward more programs and initiatives to serve the community. Bobby Seale was still in rank-and-file and helped with this shift towards “organizing community programs such as free breakfast for children... [which] gave members meaningful daily activities, strengthened Black community support, burnished Party credibility in the eyes of allies, and vividly exposed the inadequacy of the federal government’s concurrent War on Poverty.”⁵¹ The free breakfast for children program was the most famous community survival program and its implementation was pivotal because it exemplified the shift in the Party’s commitment to the people and it exemplified true community support and responsiveness. Additionally, it served as a dual space to educate youth about the conditions and experiences of the Black community in unique and engaging ways. These programs, at their core, were inherently political. The Party felt that the most important way to serve the people and bring power to the people was to support them by serving their basic needs. Panthers shied away from any mistake of labeling and operating their community survival programs as simple reform that would mirror the United States social reform efforts that often employed services as an exploitative, capitalist tool that simply gave handouts without getting to the root cause of

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 66

⁵¹ Bloom, Joshua, and Waldo E. Martin. *Black against Empire: the History and Politics of the Black Panther Party: with a New Preface*. University of California Press, 2016. pp. 13

inadequate social conditions people faced.⁵² Feeding children who were hungry, providing health care and health resources to community members, offering political education classes, and supplying clothing and shoes all for free; these programs were just a few ways that the Panthers saw the needs within their community and created a way to provide that would not reinforce and keep Oakland community members in a perpetual cycle of struggle.

Their efforts certainly troubled government officials and political leaders. The Party was viewed as a threat and one way that this was evident was due to the infamous words of J. Edgar Hoover who stated that, “The Black Panther Party, without question, represents the greatest threat to the internal security of the country.”⁵³ They posed so much of a “threat” that police would raid the Panther offices to not only destroy the Panthers’ headquarters, but to also target food and materials for community programs such as the free breakfast program. The FBI seemed to understand that the Panthers’ social ties and community networks were very strong and thus they attempted to weaken their efforts to empower people. Yet it was not uncommon for the same community members that the Panthers served to also be volunteers that supported the sustenance of the community survival programs. There were members and supporters of various racial/ethnic and class backgrounds as well. Local grocers might provide food for the free breakfast program or after school programs. Ex-addicts would work with the Panthers on programs and initiatives geared towards rehabilitation by supporting others who were currently battling addiction.⁵⁴ Even with the Sickle-Cell Anemia testing program, they made contributions to the field of health care for Black people in the local community and nationwide. The Panthers

⁵² *Ibid.* pp. 195

⁵³ J. Edgar Hoover quoted in “FBI Director Blacks Black Panthers,” *Oakland Tribune*, July 15, 1969, 17.

⁵⁴ Bloom, Joshua, and Waldo E. Martin. *Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party: with a New Preface*. University of California Press, 2016. pp. 188

knew that nothing could be done alone without ongoing commitment and mutual aid, mutual support, and coalition building.

Women in Leadership in the Black Panther Party

Discussions of gender in the Party were not unusual and the Party itself aimed to embody a belief in individuals as comrades regardless of their gender or race. However, as with anything involving humans, this did not always play out perfectly. Gender roles, stereotypes, sexism in addition to practices that deepened conflict within the Party's operations still persisted. This was especially the case when the community survival programs emerged. Women had taken up a wide array of leadership roles in the Party's Central Committee and their presence had also grown within the broader membership of the Party. Furthermore, the ideological shift that deepened a rift in Party membership was also noteworthy because it was at this same time that there was a rise of women in the ranks. The government had surveilled and targeted Panthers via assassinations, incarceration, and even exile in an effort to break the Party. A great amount of attention was placed especially on men in these efforts because the government mistook them as the primary source of the BPP's strength, but they were incorrect.

As previously mentioned, Elaine Brown was appointed the Chairman of the Black Panther Party and remained in the role from 1974-1977.⁵⁵ This made her the first and only woman to become the leader of a paramilitary organization. During her time as Chairman, Brown appointed a number of women to various leadership roles as well. Phyllis Jackson was the coordinator of the Party's campaign workers. Norma Armour was the coordinator of the ministry of finance.⁵⁶ Upon the installation of women in key positions and other areas of the Party,

⁵⁵ Oral History with Ericka Suzanne, September 28, 2020 00:00:43-00:02:47.

⁵⁶ Brown, Elaine. *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story*. Anchor Books, 1992. pp.362

Brown had no doubts about her capacity for leadership nor any about her strategic appointments. She considered it an “issue of merit, which had no gender.”⁵⁷ Brown was determined to upend this unspoken patriarchal social order of the BPP’s leadership and administration. Adamantly against all forms of oppression of women and embarking upon a quest to claim her role while maintaining her womanhood, Elaine Brown was not afraid to be labeled as a feminist, because she ensured that she would be the most radical of them all.⁵⁸ Brown had even exhibited her beliefs in the power of women prior to becoming Chairman when she ran for candidacy for Oakland’s City Council. For example, she had installed Beth Meador as her campaign manager. Her run, in addition to her skilled and candid rhetoric brought awareness to the community survival programs and this included one special survival program in particular, the Oakland Community School.

At the time of Brown’s tenure, Oakland Community School had shown itself to be one of the strongest and longest to last. It was started by the Party and was geared towards young children ages 2.5 - 11, sometimes 12 years. It was a school that was meant to serve as a model for revolutionary education for the youngest generation. It also served as a refuge for those children because the Party members recognized from their own experiences and observations that the way the public school system was operating was harming and restricting the minds of youth and had abundant space for improvement. Regarding administration of the school, women once again were shown to be a prominent force in its operations. Brenda Bay was the original director of the Intercommunal Youth Institute (the former name of the school) when it opened in

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 363

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 363

1971 until she left the Party in 1973.⁵⁹ Ericka Huggins was a teacher and had assumed the role of director at OCS after Bay departed. When Ericka Huggins assumed the role of director in 1973, this was also when the school changed its name from the Intercommunal Youth Institute to Oakland Community School. Prior to that Huggins had been an editor for *The Black Panther* newspaper through the Intercommunal News Service and a creative writing teacher at the school when it was still under the name of Intercommunal Youth Institute. Even though she had taken up the role of the director, she continued as a creative writing instructor because it was fun for her and the students.⁶⁰ At OCS, Huggins also had an open-door policy where students could come into her office at any time, unless she was discussing confidential matters, and students were also allowed to address her as Ericka rather than Ms. Huggins. A few years later, Huggins was also elected to the Alameda County School Board in 1976.

Donna Howell became the assistant director soon after Huggins became the director and Carol Granison worked alongside Huggins and Howell as a curriculum director.⁶¹ Joan Kelley directed special services and proposal writing skills which was extremely critical for the efforts of the Education Opportunities Corporations (EOC) nonprofit which worked to stabilize the finances for the school, keeping it tuition free.⁶² In addition to coordinating the Party's campaign workers, Phyllis Jackson was also the treasurer and Chief Administrator of the EOC. Lastly, Regina Davis was an OCS teacher and assistant of Ericka Huggins. Davis managed OCS personnel (teachers, cooks, etc.), oversaw daily activities, weekly field trips, and health checkups, and was a liaison between parents and other schools about the status of students. In

⁵⁹ Huggins, Ericka, and Angela D. LeBlanc-Ernest. "Revolutionary Women, Revolutionary Education: The Black Panther Party's Oakland Community School." *Want to Start a Revolution?: Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle*, edited by Dayo F. Gore et al., NYU Press, 2009, pp. 168.

⁶⁰ Oral History with Ericka Huggins, February 2, 2021 01:01:52-01:01:58

⁶¹ *Ibid.* pp. 171-173

⁶² *Ibid.* pp. 179

1977, there had been an altercation between Davis and a fellow Panther who was a man. She told the comrade to complete a task at the school and upon his failure of completing the task he was verbally reprimanded. An order of discipline had been presented and in response, Davis was severely beaten and hospitalized. This incident was an example of the continued gender differences that still pervaded Party relations internally and also marked the time when Brown, among a number of other women, left the Party.⁶³

It was clear that issues of gender were certainly pertinent throughout the Party's existence, but this did not lessen the impact and power of women in the Party as a whole. They were the backbone of the Party. The Oakland Community School was the longest lasting community survival program and even though men were present as educators and staff members at the school, its operations were overwhelmingly managed by women. Panther women also showed up in other areas outside of the community survival programs, so their reach was not isolated within one area of work in the Black Panther Party's vanguard. This presence in the school operations, however, is significant especially when considering the impact that it had on the children who attended the school.

Conclusion

This account details the strength of the Party's community activism arm which was steered in large part by women in leadership. It is important to understand the parallel between how gender had historically been discussed in society prior to research being produced that centered them, and the reality of women's force behind the most critical shift in the Black Power era and the Party's ideals. Women were present throughout; their reliable presence supported the

⁶³ Brown, Elaine. *A Taste of Power: a Black Woman's Story*. Anchor Books, 1992. pp. 391; 434; 444-445

fact that they were committed to the work of addressing community needs. There was a predominant thought that if government informants targeted the men, they would nip the entire Party, and this proved to be false. Though women were targeted as well, it was not nearly enough to stop their impact on the rank-and-file or the organizing efforts. Their strength in leadership magnified the impact of the Party in its overall political efforts and those of the community survival programs. The BPP's community survival programs were certainly supported and also run in part by men in the Party as well, but women had significant central roles that contributed to their overall success. The programs shifted the Party's focus to become more in tune with the immediate area in which they were located, but it was also targeted organizing that was responsive to locate needs that had been voiced. They did not go in creating programs that only they felt were necessary. With women at the helm, this set a powerful link between one group whose voices and expertise had been historically marginalized within the movement and their efforts to meet the needs of the larger community whose needs and voices had been overlooked by society. Furthermore, their influence certainly contributed to the success of the programs such as OCS, which was notable as the Party's longest lasting survival program, which only closed due to the ending of the Party itself.

Chapter 2:

A Community Survival Program Unlike the Rest

After operating and widening their influence for five years, the Black Panther Party encountered an ideological shift in 1971. Drifting away from the dominating ethos of militancy, masculinity, and profuse political theory, the Party began to engage in grassroots organizing and social activism efforts to directly serve Black residents in Oakland. This time also marked an unfortunate split between members in the Party. Externally, community needs were met. Food, housing, clothing, health care; the Party worked to meet those needs through the different initiatives until concrete change in the overarching oppressive social conditions could be achieved. The revolution that the Panthers were fighting for was extensive and made political strides at the more global, macro-level, but they were also aware of the pressing issues that shaped the basic plight of survival for people living in proximate oppressive conditions right in Oakland. However, internally, this shift did cause conflict in the Party's membership due to differences in what members felt should be prioritized. It was also a site of disarray for some leaders in the Central Committee. In spite of the distressing impact that the ideological transition had on the united front that the Party advocated for the revolution, the shift did present itself as a benefit to the growth of the BPP's reach within the Oakland community.

In addition to being based on needs voiced by the people, the Ten-Point Program remained steadfast as a guiding framework for what types of community survival programs the Party implemented. One community survival program, however, presented itself to be very different from the rest. The Oakland Community School was a school started by the Party that worked to exemplify the goal of providing a better education for oppressed people, as stated in

Point 5 of the Party's Ten-Point Program. In comparison to other community survival programs and even those under the focus area of education in Point 5, the Oakland Community School was different because it was a social institution in addition to a social service. Panthers saw the need for OCS in addition to listening to the concerns about education that Oakland parents and families had voiced. The school was very intentional about the learning environment that was created for young elementary aged students. It aimed to implement a curriculum needed to advance beyond the ages served at the school while also being complementary to a progressive pedagogy. Similar to the Party and its community survival programs as a whole, Panther women were especially vital to the success of the school. Thus, with Panther women at the helm, the Oakland Community School offered a revolutionary model of education that deliberately cultivated a learning community for children informed by the educators' awareness of the need for a humanizing educational experience.

An Alternative Education

In an effort to organize the Party and the goals they had in mind, the Ten-Point Platform and Program served as a guiding framework for the Party's endeavors. It was organized into "What We Want Now!" and "What We Believe" and this was inspired by Malcolm X's structure of the ten-point program crafted for Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam.⁶⁴ The BPP's platform emphasized the demands and beliefs that would serve to address the needs of Black people and other oppressed groups. Point 5 declared:

We want education for our people that exposes the true nature of this decadent American society. We want education that teaches us our true history and our role in the present day society.

⁶⁴ Bloom, Joshua, and Waldo E. Martin. *Black against Empire: the History and Politics of the Black Panther Party: with a New Preface*. University of California Press, 2016. pp. 70

We believe in an educational system that will give to our people a knowledge of self. If you do not have knowledge of yourself and your position in society and world, then you will have little chance to relate to anything else.⁶⁵

From the very beginning they hoped to create an education space for Black people that would convey history in a way that *accurately* depicted the conditions of society. Drawing on the knowledge from their analysis of Marx, the Party sought an education for oppressed people that would not indoctrinate and foster a harmful, debased way of thinking about their existence, conditions, and role in American society. Such a false consciousness within the context of education prevented people from becoming aware of the reality of systemic oppression in the United States and its profuse pervasion of their social conditions (i.e. housing quality, racial segregation, and educational attainment and quality). Providing an accurate account of historical narratives was considered a powerful tool in an individual's ability to recognize where they fit and had potential to make change in society. It was critical that this inquiry and self-discovery occur within formal educational spaces because it allowed people to connect their lived experiences to whatever content or subject material they learned about. Without that space to cultivate a critical awareness of answers to questions like "Who am I?", "Who are my people?", "What am I capable of?" in the learning environment, it remained nearly impossible to combat the larger oppressive structures that fostered inequities in the school system. Furthermore, the Panthers believed that when people were unable to connect their lived experiences to issues discussed in the learning environment, it would have minimal relevance and value for applying knowledge to individuals' existence outside of the physical school.

The educational programs created by the Panthers took many forms and were intended to educate the masses. The first iteration was their political education classes. The target audience

⁶⁵ Hilliard, David and Dr. Huey P. Newton Foundation. *The Black Panther Party: Service to the People Programs*. University of New Mexico Press, 2008. pp. 75

of the political education classes were adults and members of the Oakland community. These political education classes expanded the Party's foundation as a political organization and also taught adults (members or non-members) about the issues that gave rise to the Party, overview of Panther ideology, insight on the class struggle and its relevance to the trend in people's social conditions in Oakland, as well as literacy skills. These classes included an extensive reading list with texts such as *The Wretched of the Earth* by Frantz Fanon, *The Communist Manifesto* by Marx and Engels, as well as essays and other works from Malcolm X, Che Guevara, and Huey Newton himself.⁶⁶ The Panthers were also able to reach a wider audience of adults in a more informal way by the circulation of the Party newspaper, *The Black Panther*. It was distributed nationally and shared information about general news, the work of different BPP chapters, accounts of the Black and other oppressed communities nationally and globally, and writings of the Party beliefs.⁶⁷ The Panthers certainly had a grasp from the genesis of the Party about ways to reach and educate the masses and especially the young adult/adult population as a target audience. However, they also ensured that they did not forget about the importance of a new kind of education for a group who is often regarded as the strength of any nation: the youth.

The Panthers were aware of the shortcomings of the American education system when it came to providing a quality education for Black people and this included Black youth. Their youth-oriented educational programs took many forms. The first was their Free Breakfast for school children program. This initiative, which was also the first community survival program put into practice by the Party, was executed by numerous BPP chapters throughout the United States and aimed to provide a free, hot, nutritionally balanced breakfast for children in the area

⁶⁶ Williamson, Joy Ann. "Chapter Six: Community Control with a Black Nationalist Twist: The Black Panther Party's Educational Programs." *Counterpoints*, vol. 237, 2005, pp. 148. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/42978678

⁶⁷ Hilliard, David and Dr. Huey P. Newton Foundation. *The Black Panther Party: Service to the People Programs*. University of New Mexico Press, 2008. pp. 47

before they went to school in the mornings.⁶⁸ Food was the most important, but it was also a brief and informal space of consciousness raising where Panthers could engage with youth.⁶⁹ The volunteers organizing the programs shared affirmations to children to start their day and Chicago Panther, Akua Njeri, offered an example when recalling the affirmations they would share to students:

You came from a rich culture. You came from a place where you were kings and queens. You are brilliant children. But this government is fearful of you realizing who you are. This government has placed you in an educational situation that constantly tells you you're stupid and you can't learn and stifles you at every turn so that you can't learn.⁷⁰

They infused history into these affirmations and worked to combat the pervasive attacks on the personhood and humanity of Black youth in public schools by empowering them with historical information that positively influenced their confidence and self-esteem. The racist, oppressive systems in society that gave rise to the Party permeated into school environments and the Party knew that it was imperative that these systems be reckoned with because the schools influenced any potential for Black children to feel safe, have their minds nurtured, and be actively engaged in their education. To broaden their educational arm, the Party soon created liberation schools which were comparable to community programs that occur after-school or during the summer. Students attended after school during the academic year and during the summers which might span 3 months in accordance with the typical length of a summer break. There was a curriculum in place that told of the origins of the BPP, the Ten-Point Platform, and informed students of class struggle through the context of Black history as well as people of all colors.⁷¹ The last

⁶⁸ Hilliard, David and Dr. Huey P. Newton Foundation. *The Black Panther Party: Service to the People Programs*. University of New Mexico Press, 2008. pp. 30

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* pp. 34

⁷⁰ Perlstein, Daniel. "Minds Stayed on Freedom: Politics and Pedagogy in the African-American Freedom Struggle." *American Educational Research Journal*, vol. 39, no. 2, 2002, pp. 263. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3202522.

⁷¹ Williamson, Joy Ann. "Chapter Six: Community Control with a Black Nationalist Twist: The Black Panther Party's Educational Programs." *Counterpoints*, vol. 237, 2005, pp. 144-145. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/42978678

iteration of the Party's programmatic trajectory to crafting programs that fostered a more revolutionary education came in the form of a school.

The Establishment of an Educational Institution

The Panther's decision to establish a school was different from the other educational programs because it was intended to be an even more permanent solution to the chronic issues that existed in the U.S. education system. The school aimed to be an entirely new alternative space of learning for students to attend rather than going to existing schools. The BPP built on the traditions of assuming community control of education and independent Black institutions for Black youth to receive their education. As historian Russell Rickford argues:

Independent black institutions were more than sites of indoctrination. They constituted a vibrant Black Power submovement, a crusade rooted in the renascent idea that African Americans were a subjugated nation, an "internal colony" that needed to claim intellectual and cultural autonomy before achieving true liberation through formal statehood or community self-rule...By presenting credible alternatives that fulfilled human needs, such ventures could win the loyalty of the people, exposing the failings of the existing social apparatus and serving as tools for mass politicization.⁷²

The Party's school was a response to the oppression that was occurring in the American public school system. Black students were being deemed as ineducable, dehumanized, and frankly not cared for adequately in any way, shape, or form. The Party took issue with this because they knew the children deserved a better educational experience than what was being offered to them.

⁷² "Introduction: Education, Black Power, and the Radical Imagination." *We Are An African People: Independent Education, Black Power, and the Radical Imagination*, by Russell John Rickford, Oxford University Press, 2019, pp. 2.

Chronology

The Oakland Community School was first established in 1970 inside of a big house under the name of the Children's House.⁷³ The Children's House was originally meant to serve the children of Black Panther Party members. Angela LeBlanc-Ernest and Ericka Huggins noted how former BPP members and leaders in the Central Committee, David Hilliard and Bobby Seale, sought to "provide a safe place for BPP members' children and to serve as an informal home-based community school."⁷⁴ The Children's House was a full-time version of the liberation schools where students lived in the space in a dormitory fashion. A year later, in 1971, however, the school changed its name to the Intercommunal Youth Institute (IYI). IYI was similar to the Children's House in that it provided academic classes and instruction on the Party origins and beliefs, though it was a bit different because it was at a new site in the Fruitvale area of Oakland. Additionally, they opened the doors to students who were not children of BPP members, but who lived within close proximity of the house where the IYI was located.⁷⁵ The school also had field trips for students that exposed the connections between what they were learning in the classroom and what was happening in the world. Students also engaged with the community by visiting *Black Panther* distribution sites, connecting with other kids in the neighborhood, and visiting political prisoners.

By 1973, the school had reached its final destination in East Oakland and it landed there under its final name change, Oakland Community School. The new building was larger and

⁷³ Huggins, Ericka. "The Liberations Schools, the Children's House, the Intercommunal Youth Institute and the Oakland Community School." written by Ericka Huggins for the Oakland IYI/OCS Photo Gallery 2007, pp. 1-2.

⁷⁴ Huggins, Ericka, and Angela D. LeBlanc-Ernest. "Revolutionary Women, Revolutionary Education: The Black Panther Party's Oakland Community School." *Want to Start a Revolution?: Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle*, edited by Dayo F. Gore et al., NYU Press, 2009, pp. 168.

⁷⁵ Oral History with Ericka Huggins, February 2, 2021. 00:59:40-00:59:56.

functioned as a multipurpose community center, known as Oakland Community Learning Center, which OCS operated out of during the day hours. This move and name change marked two significant shifts in the ideology and operations of the school. The first was that the school was no longer functioning as a site that had the additional motive of training future Panthers. Instead, they worked to build a greater emphasis on providing a curriculum and progressive pedagogy that would ensure students' academic excellence upon exiting the school. This was also imperative because even though there were educational programs for older students in the community, the school had only expanded to exclusively serve elementary aged students. At that point in time, they were aware that students would eventually have to transition out of the OCS environment to advance their educational journeys. So, they worked to make sure students were equipped in the realm of basic skills and subjects, but also equipped in their mindsets by being empowered and confident in themselves and their abilities. The second shift marked by the school's move was physical. They moved to a new location that was more centralized and geographically accessible to Oakland's working-class families and community members. This also ensured that students who needed rides to school would be able to get picked up by Panther volunteers at the school and arrive in a timely manner for breakfast and the start of school each day.

The Oakland Community School

Oakland Community School represented the Black Panther's Party's efforts to form a new educational system through the creation of a dedicated school site. Described by many as an oasis, the school provided a new, refreshing option for parents, families and children when it came to education. Former teacher and director, Ericka Huggins, referenced OCS as an oasis when she declared, "I felt like everybody who came to that school had been really, really thirsty

and had found water. It was an oasis in the educational desert, and everybody felt that way about it.”⁷⁶ Huggins detailed that not only did community members, families, and educators feel that way, it was also school officials within the California public school system such as the superintendent of public schools in Oakland and the assistant superintendent for the State Department of Education for California who all felt that OCS was offering something that no other school had done.

Though Oakland Community School was no longer a mere incorporation of the Party’s political ideals in an effort to train future Panthers, it remained grounded in ideologies of the Party through the environment that was cultivated at the school. The school was tuition-free and this was ensured by securing various streams of revenue, including funds from the Education Opportunities Corporation, a nonprofit community-based 501(c)3 that helped administer the school and auxiliary support through grants, fundraising, donations, and support from other community organizations.⁷⁷ There was transportation available for students to and from school. Hot breakfast, lunch, and dinner was served to all students. The school was parent friendly and ensured that parent (and student) voices were listened to and suggestions implemented accordingly. The school’s demographics included students from all throughout the Oakland area (West Oakland, East Oakland, North Richmond, etc.); so they were not restricted by the laws of zoning or redlining that promoted segregation and gave rise to the many systemic inequities that still exist in education today. Students also belonged to a wide array of backgrounds. Though the student body was predominantly Black, roughly 90%, OCS also welcomed students of other races/ethnicities and had children who identified as Mexican-American, Asian-American, white,

⁷⁶ Oral History with Ericka Huggins, February 2, 2021. 01:02:06-01:02:26.

⁷⁷ Jones, Charles E., and Jonathan Gayles. “The World Is A Child’s Classroom: An Analysis of the Black Panther Party’s Oakland Community School.” *Teach Freedom: Education for Liberation in the African-American Tradition*, by Charles M. Payne et al., Teachers College Press, 2008, pp. 100–112.

and other ethnicities.⁷⁸ The school was also quite popular and once it reached capacity at 150 students, they ended up with a long waiting list.

The students' curricular experience was marked by the incorporation of creative elements. They had a standard curriculum that included the following subjects: Language Arts/English, Creative Writing, Spanish, Mathematics, Social Science/Politics, Current Events/Movements, U.S. History, World History, and Environmental Studies.⁷⁹ Extracurriculars included a wide array of activities. They offered Physical Education with activities such as Aerobic Exercise, Martial Arts, Volleyball, Skating, and Softball.⁸⁰ Performing Arts included Dance, Theater and Music.⁸¹ Visual Arts was also an option with activities such as crafts, drawing, and painting.⁸² Former student, Leilah Kirkendoll recalled a day in the life at OCS that detailed the aforementioned elements:

...you [woke] up, you got in the van and went to school. You always ate good food, our cooks were second to none...then, you'd go to class and you would have work to do. There was a lot of checking [in] to make sure you understood [or to] see if you needed to be pushed up. I remember we had levels we didn't have grades...So you were never bored, you were always being challenged, always being pushed to do your best and to do better.

[Then there were] the activities. I was in ballet. I learned how to knit. I crocheted. I swam. We did ice skating, roller skating, and we played four square and kickball. So it was just a very authentic elementary experience, but very loving, very supportive...It was

⁷⁸ Huggins, Ericka, and Angela D. LeBlanc-Ernest. "Revolutionary Women, Revolutionary Education: The Black Panther Party's Oakland Community School." *Want to Start a Revolution?: Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle*, edited by Dayo F. Gore et al., NYU Press, 2009, pp. 172.

⁷⁹ Hilliard, David and Dr. Huey P. Newton Foundation. *The Black Panther Party: Service to the People Programs*. University of New Mexico Press, 2008. pp. 7-12

⁸⁰ "Physical Education Program: Oakland Community School - A Model in Action." *The Black Panther 18 No. 2:1-28 (January 28, 1978)*. San Francisco: Black Panther Party. Black Panther Productions, 1978. 11. *Black Thought and Culture Database*. Web.

⁸¹ "Music Program: Oakland Community School a Model in Action." *The Black Panther 18 No. 6:1-28 (February 25, 1978)*. San Francisco: Black Panther Party. Black Panther Productions, 1978. 12. *Black Thought and Culture Database*. Web

⁸² "Art Program: Oakland Community School - A Model in Action." *The Black Panther 18 No. 4:1-28 (February 11, 1978)*. San Francisco: Black Panther Party. Black Panther Productions, 1978. 38. *Black Thought and Culture Database*. Web.

very what we call now life application, but back then, I guess we called it the real world; your examples, your experiences.⁸³

The curriculum at Oakland Community School in and of itself was comparable to the core academic courses that would have been offered to students at most other elementary schools in the U.S. public school system. The wide array of extracurriculars that Leilah described added to the uniqueness of the overall experience, but the most distinct difference was the way in which the content and subject material was taught. In other words, a striking aspect of OCS was their pedagogy.

The Roots of OCS's Pedagogy

The curriculum at OCS was relatively ordinary but it was taught in an extraordinary manner. OCS had a progressive pedagogy, and this was evident in many ways. To first define progressive pedagogy, Daniel Perlstein noted that common discussions regarding what a progressive pedagogy is usually includes the following: building on children's interests, promoting active problem solving, and connecting learning to life.⁸⁴ Leilah spoke to OCS's real-world application that made the process of learning the general curriculum an overwhelmingly unique experience. Examples of all three attributes of a progressive pedagogy can be seen first through the infusion of OCS's motto, "the world is a child's classroom," into classes offered at the school. In Math, students could apply their learning by going to the local store to get change or going to two stores to compare the cost of items. For Language Arts, they could reference the *Black Panther* newspaper and employ their reading and comprehension skills. In Science, they

⁸³ Oral History with Leilah Armour Kirkendoll, October 21, 2020. 00:12:48-00:16:24.

⁸⁴ Perlstein, Daniel. "Minds Stayed on Freedom: Politics and Pedagogy in the African-American Freedom Struggle." *American Educational Research Journal*, vol. 39, no. 2, 2002, pp. 249–277. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3202522.

worked to build scientific knowledge and balance “nature and man” because educators felt that “awareness of self [was] a crucial preliminary stage to the understanding of scientific principles and is a major area of learning within the science courses.”⁸⁵ All of the courses were intentionally structured so that students could apply whatever they learned in the classroom to their everyday lives. Lived experiences were highly valued in the classroom at OCS because educators were aware that those experiences were not something that could simply be taken off like a coat and left at the door of the classroom. If students came with questions about why something happened in their neighborhood or something closer in proximity such as a police officer stopping their parents’ car on the way home from school, OCS staff did not shy away from working through the complexities of the issues with children.

The ability for students to apply their knowledge in the classroom to their lived experiences was also rooted in the overall goal of Point 5 that emphasized exposing the true nature and history of American society. OCS staff taught in a manner that was full of candor in an effort to combat the act of indoctrinating students with half-truths. Ericka relayed how she perceived the candor regarding half-truths that had persisted in American history through her class’s critical discussion of President Thomas Jefferson:

Some of the things that we learned in OCS were so natural and normal to me until I was not in that school system...I do remember, even at seven, there was a conversation about Sally Hemmings. Sometimes our teachers, especially the ones that were Panthers, they would speak to us like adults. It may not be appropriate for them to be like “All these muthafuckers talking about ‘She was his lover,’ this is a 14 year old girl. So you know what that is children, right? That is a pedophile. That is a president who is a pedophile.

Then I left that school and...started public school in Beverly Hills. Our teacher was talking about Australia and I said, “Oh, well it was founded by a bunch of castoffs and prisoners. It was a penal colony.” Our white teacher was like, “How dare you? Why

⁸⁵ Hilliard, David and Dr. Huey P. Newton Foundation. *The Black Panther Party: Service to the People Programs*. University of New Mexico Press, 2008. pp. 6-7

would you say that about Australia?” But based on the things I learned in the Party I [recognized with the new teacher that] “You’re telling us something that’s not true.”⁸⁶

Suzanne’s experience exemplified OCS and the Party’s commitment to being honest when discussing course material. Educators at OCS met difficult topics face on and they did not gloss over marginalized and minoritized perspectives on certain events. The example of how the narrative of Sally Hemmings was conveyed at OCS emphasized the inappropriate nature regarding enslavement and age in the nonconsensual relationship between Hemmings and Thomas Jefferson. The revisionist phrasing of Hemmings as Jefferson’s “lover” was also an issue of schools’ (in the broader context of their existence in society) power to sanitize historical events. OCS teachers adapted lessons to ensure that they were instructed in a manner that was developmentally appropriate, accurate, and conscious of all narratives, especially through the lens of those who were oppressed. However, these instructional methods did not aim to impose and tell students what to think. Educators offered insight by providing fuller narratives of people involved so that students might be encouraged to come to their own conclusions.

The second way that OCS existed as a progressive educational environment was by their approach to grade levels, peer-to-peer interactions, and testing. Leilah described how she remembered having levels instead of grades. This was purposely incorporated at OCS where students were “...placed by ability, not by age...[they didn’t] have grades anymore, only levels of classes, according to subject matter.”⁸⁷ This was an idea from Ericka Huggins who was a teacher and director of OCS. With this approach students were grouped according to their level in a particular subject rather than a singular grade, it allowed many students to become advanced in their academics. For example, if a student mastered pre-algebra in mathematics, they could

⁸⁶ Oral History with Ericka Suzanne, September 28, 2020 00:41:52-00:43:10

⁸⁷ Brown, Elaine. *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story*. Anchor Books, 1992, pp. 391

move on to the level where they would start discussing algebra in class. If this same student could read well but struggled with a foundational skill base of reading comprehension, they would remain at that level until mastering that area of comprehension. However, moving forward in math was not dependent on moving forward in reading. Although educators certainly worked to ensure that students were progressing in all areas, this is just an example of how the levels functioned. Additionally, students engaged in an “each one teach one” method if they were particularly advanced in a subject. David Hilliard, former Chief of Staff, described this process as it operated within the learning environment:

The instructors and students have mutual love and respect for one another; both understand the need for the principle "each one help one; each one teach one." They live, work, and play together. Everything is done collectively in order to develop an understanding of solidarity and camaraderie in a practical way.⁸⁸

Students embodied the “each one teach one” practice by tutoring peers if they needed help. They were not shamed by an instructor or told to sit in a corner if they were advanced. They were instead empowered to help their peers and there was a mutual benefit: their understanding was deepened, and the peer received alternative ways to understand concepts beyond what had been provided via individualized instruction by the teacher. Most students at Oakland Community School excelled significantly throughout their educational paths and by the time they graduated from the school by the age 11 or 12 years old, they were academically advanced. The age at which they left was dependent on a varied number of circumstances, but more often than not when students exited OCS at age 11 or 12, they were guaranteed to be at the standard ninth-grade level which was three years their senior when comparing standard age/grade correlations. Although she left OCS at age 7, Leilah also happened to be one of those students who was about

⁸⁸Hilliard, David and Dr. Huey P. Newton Foundation. *The Black Panther Party: Service to the People Programs*. University of New Mexico Press, 2008. pp. 5-6

three grade levels ahead upon her departure. When she exited OCS, she was advanced enough to be in third grade, and eventually ended up graduating high school early at age 16. Furthermore, OCS was also different from other California schools because they did not rely on high stakes testing as the guiding framework for students' curricular and overall educational experience. When they did use testing, it was utilized 1) for families and children in case they needed documentation once they were leaving OCS and 2) to satisfy state requirements for funding.⁸⁹

The Oakland Community School held fast to the ideal of teaching students *how* to think rather than *what* to think. It was contrary to the banking model that prevailed (and continues to prevail) in most schools in the U.S. education system. In line with Paulo Freire's approach to education, OCS incorporated a pedagogy that empowered students to think critically for themselves and educators were there for reference and to be in dialogue. It was a site of inquiry-based learning, where students were encouraged to ask questions about learning material, real life experiences, or even general areas of curiosity and interest. They were often asked the question "Did you investigate?" when going to teachers with a problem.⁹⁰ Dialectical thinking was incorporated through the pedagogy as well because they discussed and reasoned in the classroom through dialogue and investigation. The school also implemented restorative practices such as yoga and mini exercises to start the day, meditation after lunch, and a Youth Advisory Board. The Youth Advisory Board, also known as the Justice Board, fell under the umbrella of student-driven initiatives within the Youth Committee at OCS. The justice board which was a peer accountability initiative where students would go to a "board" of their peers if they were having trouble with something that impacted their behavior or academics. The student would get

⁸⁹ Huggins, Ericka, and Angela D. LeBlanc-Ernest. "Revolutionary Women, Revolutionary Education: The Black Panther Party's Oakland Community School." *Want to Start a Revolution?: Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle*, edited by Dayo F. Gore et al., NYU Press, 2009, pp. 176

⁹⁰ Oral History with Ericka Huggins, February 2, 2021. 01:07:09-01:07:17.

a chance to explain what was wrong or why they did what they did and as a collective, the group would brainstorm a solution that a student might be able to implement in order to overcome their particular struggle. For example, if a student did not do their homework because they were watching TV instead of studying, a solution the board might recommend is for that student to not watch TV and dedicate a little more time for studying that upcoming evening. The Youth Committee also included a bimonthly newsletter (by students, for students), an in-school youth store, and *KIDS*, a student-led radio program.⁹¹ The Youth Committee demonstrated OCS's efforts to empower students to be change agents within their learning community. They were able to take ownership and steer the direction of activities that made the school what it was with guidance from instructors.

In addition to the intellectual aspect of the learning environment, educators also firmly believed in ensuring that the *whole* child was taken care of. Huggins detailed the significance behind this belief and how it manifested in the interactions between students and teachers. She mentioned former student Kellita Smith, who is now an actress, and Smith's memory of how fortunate she and her younger brother were to be able to attend Oakland Community School. Huggins recalled her conversation with Smith and discussed the former student's perspective of how OCS impacted her personally with their philosophy of caring for the *whole* child:

"You asked me how Oakland Community School benefited all of the parts of me?" [Kellita] said, "I remember coming to school one day and my braids were a mess, hair sticking out of the braids and some linen," she's a comedian so she had me dying laughing about this. But she said, "I know I looked a mess, but my mother was going to college. She was a single mom putting herself through UC Berkeley, and my brother and I were a lot of work. She wanted the best for us but she sent me to school looking like that."

⁹¹ Jones, Charles E., and Jonathan Gayles. "The World Is A Child's Classroom: An Analysis of the Black Panther Party's Oakland Community School." *Teach Freedom: Education for Liberation in the African-American Tradition*, by Charles M. Payne et al., Teachers College Press, 2008, pp. 100–112.

I was mad at my mother because I couldn't do my own braids. I walked in, lips stuck out to the front door and a teacher walked up with a hairbrush and said 'C'mon Kellita, I'll take your braids out and put them back in. I don't think your mother would mind.'" She said, "That helped me in my body, in my spirit, and in my mind. I've never forgotten it because I looked really cute after that."⁹²

Kellita also mentioned how she was surprised because she didn't tell anyone how she was feeling, but the teacher just knew. Ericka responded by telling her that it was because "we said it was our job to know what was going on with the 150 kids. We loved you like you were our own."⁹³ Ericka's remark exemplified how the OCS learning community was rooted at the very core in love and in the adamant belief that a humanizing educational experience was possible for young Black children.

The Oakland Community School Learning Community

The learning community at OCS was composed of staff--educators, volunteers, cooks, administrators--and students. With the phrasing, I am referring to those engaged in the overall educational experience within the Oakland Community School. There were professionals who were certified in teaching and instruction, as well as specific curricular subject areas. But the school also welcomed volunteers who were not certified, including individuals who were working towards certification in a practicum, or who wanted to tutor in the very basic practice of supporting struggling students in particular subject areas. The learning community within OCS is important to note, because the school was also very grounded within the broader community of Oakland. OCS did not necessitate students or educators' direct affiliation with the school by attendance or work because it was also located within the larger Oakland Community Learning

⁹² Oral History with Ericka Huggins, February 2, 2021. 01:14:36-01:16:02.

⁹³ Oral History with Ericka Huggins, February 2, 2021. 01:16:04-01:16:20.

Center building, which hosted a variety of other community survival programs. Thus, there was never a point in time where the school was separated from the broader community.

Influence of OCS Staff

The OCS staff as a collective believed that affirming the children's humanity via their experiences and identities was at the very foundation of the school and it was critical to execute so that children might be prepared to combat anything that came their way outside of the school's walls. When embarking upon the creation of the school and especially when opening it up to the public to include students who were not Panther cubs, Huggins recalled that OCS staff researched early "education pioneers" who had historically been Black women of the church that had made strides in the space of alternative education, especially in the South prior to the mid 20th century. She emphasized how these women incorporated their different experiences and identities to inform their pedagogy and practice of teaching and also noted the inspiration from Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire. When discussing these inspirational figures Huggins recalled:

They brought prayer into it, but they brought their own knowledge of being women, Black women to that educational environment. Then we were a part of the alternative schools movement. We looked at what all kinds of people were doing. What Paulo Freire was doing in Latin America with literacy education.

He wasn't just jumping in there with no understanding of Spanish and Latin American cultures. He went understanding that if adults can't read, you can't just give them something to read. It has to have meaning. It has to have meaning for them and their future.⁹⁴

OCS educators were following in the tradition of radical Black education by their creation of an alternative school for young children. At the same time, they were aware that by operating out of

⁹⁴ Oral History with Ericka Huggins February 2, 2021. 01:21:55-01:23:23

the Party, they were entering into the Oakland community in a way that they had not previously done. Surpassing the creation of social programs, they physically established a structural space for education and, similar to Freire, recognized the need to be cognizant of what it meant to open a new school in the area. OCS staff members brought expertise by a combination of lived experiences and formal training in order to provide a learning environment that would successfully respond to and uplift Oakland's desire for community control of educational institutions.

Parents and families who were not members of the BPP voiced the desire for better education for their children. Thus, in addition to conducting research to inform how they would enter into and open the school in the greater Oakland community, OCS staff members were also balancing two very important considerations that would help to characterize the school. The first was their own experiences. Ericka stated that "we had to work with all the horrific ways we'd been treated in order to come up with a way to treat the children."⁹⁵ It was not a simple process because teachers were forced to recall the harm that had been inflicted upon them during their time as youth in the United States public education system. For many it may have come with sparks of joy and excitement, and for others anger or sadness; but together they used those lived experiences in a holistic way to shape their plans for how the educational environment, which included both social and academic aspects, would be directed. Huggins recalled the staff meetings as an unbelievable space. This was so, because the educators were extremely responsive, creative, critical, and they did not accept the shortcomings of the American education system. One great example of this was the justice board. It was an idea that had come up during a

⁹⁵ Oral History with Ericka Huggins February 2, 2021. *01:10:02-01:10:23*

staff meeting. The staff recalled their own experiences of detention and how students would get sent to detention for forgetting to do their homework:

We came up with that because we'd all been raised with the detentions that [were] a part of the carceral socialization. [It implied] "get these kids ready for prison," and we were like "uh uh"...because you didn't do your homework, you're gonna be sent to detention? Something's wrong with that.⁹⁶

Everything OCS staff members implemented came from the deliberation of a particular decision as a collective. Practices were informed by collective input and staff made certain that children would also be treated with compassion. They recognized how repressive systems within society mirrored and permeated into the schools, hence Ericka's correlation regarding the carceral nature of detention. This carceral socialization also showed up in schools through the policing of the grammar and vernacular of Black children. OCS staff members had a discussion about if students "misspeak" where Huggins recalled:

We were all raised in the same controlled environments. So quite often when Black and Brown children would speak, they would get corrected in mid sentence. How does that make a little person feel? Who cares if they make a mistake? Then we had to have the conversation, "Well what if they can't spell when we ask them to write things?"

Let them misspell everything. That's secondary to them expressing themselves. They can misspell every word they want to misspell. When we affirm them, when we love them, they'll want to know a better way to say it so that the reader or other writers can benefit.⁹⁷

Ericka's example of typical schools', and also society's, obsession with correcting Black children when they show up as their full selves demonstrated the pervasive issue of student expression being policed. OCS faculty believed that students' voices were not only being silenced but they were being characterized as deviant as well. OCS educators were very aware of how the education system weaponized power using teachers as an apparatus to subtly enforce inferiority while simultaneously fostering the process of erasure and dehumanization. It was

⁹⁶ Oral History with Ericka Huggins February 2, 2021. 01:03:27-01:03:43

⁹⁷ Oral History with Ericka Huggins, February 2, 2021. 01:05:18-01:06:12.

normal for Black children to be seen and not heard. This also widened the discussion of deeply rooted beliefs that society in general, and schools in particular, embodied the need to enforce discipline upon students, who were predominantly low-income people of color, in order for them to do well academically. OCS educators were actively resisting this violent narrative that impacts Black children especially. Even further, if teachers themselves came to one another with contradicting, harmful ideas, it was a similar process of dialogue and dialectical thinking where all questions and shortcomings of a proposed decision were considered before coming to a final resolution.

The second consideration that OCS staff members had to balance was their imagination of what the school environment should look like for children. While also being informed by the experiences of how the American education system had failed them as adults, they also drew from their creativity and radical imagination to craft an environment that would not only humanize students, but also be replicable as a revolutionary model. They brainstormed and collaborated to discover what they did not have in their adolescent educational experiences that they would have loved to have. Student voice and student driven activities at the school signified that they valued the voices and experiences of children. They encouraged students to be confident in themselves and their knowledge by instilling in the children that their identities, opinions, and ideas were respected. They also imparted certain expressions on the children such as the use of the term “comrade” when referring to one another. Regarding social identities, OCS educators also had a progressive approach. Within the context of the school, the ills that gave rise to the Party--police brutality, racism, class struggle--were not amplified in the environment. Students were relatively shielded from the embodiment of negative issues, behaviors, and actions that occurred because of different identities. OCS emphasized the purpose of serving the people

and your community. Students saw one another as comrades, and with gender or race, for example, the stereotypes and negative societal ideologies were not fostered within the learning environment. Stereotypical beliefs--such as Black parents are not invested in their child's education, Black students are lazy, girls aren't skilled in STEM, or boys shouldn't do art-- were strategically addressed by methods such as dialectical discourse or encouragement to explore the beliefs further and then return with their findings. Educators tried with their utmost ability to foster an identity affirming environment in all aspects.

Conclusion

The educational initiatives of the Black Panther Party were not always executed under sunshine and rainbows. The Party's successful creation of programs that worked to provide an honest depiction of the history of society which also achieved the goal of instilling a knowledge of self was a threat to the social order in the eyes of the government. The raids on Panther offices in Oakland that held very important documents sometimes housed materials for the Free Breakfast Programs and OCS as well. Sometimes invasions would occur on the programs while kids were present. With the establishment of a school that had daytime classes, there were more opportunities for the learning time to be engaging for students and for it to be student-centered. With the Free Breakfast Programs and Liberation Schools, the length of time that the children could be there was more limited because they had to get to school and the two education programs functioned more as informal, supplementary learning spaces. With the school, the Panthers were able to establish themselves formally as an educational site that provided a high-quality and holistic educational foundation and then the more informal, supplementary sites (Liberation Schools and Free Breakfast) continued to extend their reach within the community of Oakland. The Party recognized that formal and informal spaces of education were invaluable

because both spheres served as evidence of the fact that learning is not restricted to the classroom and must be relevant to lived experiences. Utilizing the standpoint of OCS educators and especially the experiences of Panther women as a framework, it was evident that the children were affirmed, loved, and challenged academically. With the school being embedded within the larger Oakland Community Learning Center building, students were also able to be engaged in a progressive educational environment that empowered them while also empowering the community members that the Party worked to serve in other areas of need.

Chapter 3:

The Role of OCS in the Oakland Community

When remembering OCS, a large amount of memory work comes from the educators, but also from students themselves. Students and children in general whose parents were in the Party or who were connected to the Party through the different community programs were always shielded and protected. The spaces created by the Party for children were intentional safe spaces and due to the high levels of protection the students' memories are oftentimes less likely to be attached to the stark levels of trauma that many adults experienced. This is not to say that there were not good memories of the Party or that children themselves did not experience difficult things, but it is notable that memories associated with OCS (from educators and students) are predominantly positive. The school has been referenced as not only a space for education, but also one that was driven by the power of family, community, and service to the people. OCS embodied a poignant, central ideal of the Party: service to the people and all those who are oppressed. The Oakland Community School focused on meeting the educational needs of young children in Oakland, but they also transgressed beyond the physical boundaries as a school building and intended to be an enduring landmark for the greater Oakland community.

The OCS Learning Community Through the Eyes of Students

The educational experience at the Oakland Community School was certainly one of a kind. Though the school was only in existence for 9 years, 1973-1982, the school had a tremendous impact on students, educators, and the Oakland community at large. Through the narratives of students who attended OCS, the impact on the individual students is especially pertinent. When understanding the context of a student's experience, it is also important to

consider the length of time or tenure in which the students themselves were at OCS for their educational experience. The tenure, or length of time, in which a student began and ended their career at Oakland Community School certainly differed from person to person. A few students recall being between the ages 2.5 to 7 years old at the dawn of their time at OCS, and each of whom also remember it as their earliest memory with school and education.⁹⁸

Student Leilah Armour Kirkendoll was born in Los Angeles, California and raised in Oakland, California. She was the daughter of two L.A. natives. Her mother from East L.A. and father from West L.A., met in college and were very involved in activism. Her father joined the Party and her mother joined soon after. Her mother, Norma Armour, soon climbed the ranks to be in charge of the free health clinics (including the Bunchy Carter Health Clinic) in L.A., as well as being the chief financial officer (CFO) of the Party. After some time in L.A., they eventually moved to Oakland around 1971/1972.⁹⁹ Kirkendoll began attending OCS at the age of two and left at the age of six.¹⁰⁰ Immediate aspects of her memory of OCS included breakfast, lunch, and dinner being served, living and being with the people she went to school with in dorms, activities, and lots of rallies, chants, and songs¹⁰¹. She had faint memories of the nurseries for infants and younger toddlers, and distinctly recalled the experience of living in the dorms where students would live and get transported to and from via the school van in the mornings before breakfast and evenings after dinner. Regarding the physical makeup of the school environment, she remembered teachers, carpeted areas, bean bags, and general furniture.

⁹⁸ Oral History with Ericka Suzanne, September 28, 2020; Oral History with Leilah Armour Kirkendoll, October 21, 2020; Oral History with Kesha Hackett, November 11, 2020.

⁹⁹ Oral History with Leilah Armour Kirkendoll October 21, 2020. 00:03:10-00:05:45.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.* 00:07:25-00:09:35; 00:10:12-00:11:35.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.* 00:06:00-00:07:15.

Similar to her peer and close friend, Leilah Kirkendoll, student Ericka Suzanne was born in L.A. and raised in Oakland as well. She later moved and grew through the older years of her adolescence in Beverly Hills, CA. Both of her parents were leading members in the Black Panther Party. Her mother was Chairman Elaine Brown who had become the “only woman to be the leader of a paramilitary organization” and her father was Raymond Masai Hewitt, captain of the Buddha Samurai, which according to Suzanne was “subsection of the Black Panther Party that represented the things that people feared most.”¹⁰² Suzanne was around three years old when she started attending OCS and left at age eight in 1978, about three academic years before the school closed its doors in the Spring of 1982.¹⁰³ Recollection of memories at OCS for Ericka included swimming, the science house, lemongrass, and food in general.¹⁰⁴

When detailing the physical school environment, Ericka remembered that there were pictures of heroes all throughout the school. There were images of people who were considered to be freedom fighters such as Bobby Hutton in addition to individuals from other parts of the world such as Korea, Mozambique, and China. Suzanne stated that “some weren’t in the books, but they were on the wall,” and this immediate memory gives a very layered, yet slight glimpse into the intentionality of not only the school and its pedagogy, but also the physical space in which the learning environment was cultivated. She also recalled times in the dorm as Leilah had when describing who lived there: “You didn’t have to have [your] parents be members of the Party in order to attend the school. It’s just that those whose parents were in the Party, lived in the dorm. Some kids went home every day.”¹⁰⁵ It was also noted that children who were not children of Panthers were able to stay in the dorms if their parents/families needed assistance

¹⁰² Oral History with Ericka Suzanne, September 28, 2020. 00:00:43-00:02:47.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.* 00:00:43-00:02:47; 00:19:36-00:20:04.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.* 00:07:40-00:08:32.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.* 00:17:22-00:18:29.

with care. The Panthers did not discriminate when it came to caring for children and OCS as a familial environment was fostered by caring for the *whole* child and ensuring that their needs--food, education, housing, etc.--were met.

Lastly, student Kesha Hackett was another student who recalled vivid memories of the school and its education. For Hackett, OCS was at the forefront of the educational experiences she had over her lifetime. Hackett differed from Kirkendoll and Suzanne particularly because she was not the child of Panthers. Both of her parents and their families were a part of the second wave of the mass relocation of African Americans from the Southern United States that was the Great Migration. Reaching the destination of Oakland, California, her father's family moved from Mississippi and her mother's family from Texas.¹⁰⁶ Hackett grew up in Oakland and though her parents were not members of the Party, this did not lessen the impact of OCS on her overall educational experience. Her earliest memories with school and education were centered around the Oakland Community School and noted it as a great place to be where she was able to see people who looked like her. Hackett recalled that she began attending OCS at the age of 5 or 6 years old and left around ages 11 and 12.¹⁰⁷ When recalling her earliest memory even further, she went on to describe the demographics in which Black students were in the majority, but she did recall seeing two white students and distinctly remembered their cowboy boots. Hackett concluded the description of her earliest memory of school and education through the lens of OCS as follows: "[It was] a loving environment where instructors were like aunts and uncles; they cared. They cared about us."¹⁰⁸ This familial thread woven within the OCS experience was expressed not only by Hackett, but by Kirkendoll and Suzanne as well.

¹⁰⁶ Oral History with Kesha Hackett, November 11, 2020. 00:01:57-00:03:10.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.* 00:07:05-00:08:00; 00:08:05-00:09:10.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.* 00:04:50-00:06:25.

Considering the fact that OCS educators were involved in the lives of students within and outside of the classroom, it strengthened the sense of family and familial belonging that many students believed was central to their OCS experiences. Ericka Suzanne voiced that misconceptions of the Party also trickled down into misconceptions of Panther cubs and children who were supported by the Party: “What people don’t understand [is that] it’s not a political party for us. For us, it’s family.”¹⁰⁹ Students spent a lot of time together. They were eating breakfast, lunch, and dinner together and getting bedtime stories read as well. Even if other children went home after dinner at the end of every school day, that sliver of a time difference was not enough to weaken the family dynamics that were woven within the interactions of students who lived in the dorms. This offers insight into why students state that they were *raised* at Oakland Community School, rather than simply *attended* OCS. But a very small piece of what Ericka stated is very telling of the roots that OCS planted in students’ lives. The word *raised* was used in reference to her overall experience at Oakland Community School. When one typically hears the word raised, they may think of how they were brought up by family members or guardians and for some even community members or mentors. Family in and of itself, is a social institution. It is a space of connection and kinship where individuals most often find their first place of belonging and identity within a community. Family as a social institution also exists as a space of learning where the individual is growing and picking up on certain beliefs, mannerisms, and practices, both consciously and unconsciously. It fosters a sense of belonging, a sense of safety, and a space of refuge. Suzanne’s use of the term *raised* suggests many students felt this familial sense of connection to the people in and around OCS and this worked to support not only their understanding about the value of the family, blood or chosen, but it also cultivated

¹⁰⁹ Oral History with Ericka Suzanne, September 28, 2020. 00:37:36-00:37:44.

a safe environment where students knew that educators were there to support, nurture and uplift them.

Oakland Community School had astounding impacts on the students who went there. When asked to describe the overall experience at OCS, there were many different perspectives offered that exemplified the learning environment that OCS aimed to create. Leilah detailed it as “the place to be” and recalled loving her teachers, loving her friends, and loving the experience of OCS. She continued by recalling her own physical/behavioral habits in addition to memories of food within the environment as well:

I was a little sassy little thing. I remember getting in trouble and having to be disciplined. It wasn't like a pushover kind of environment, but it was very loving, very supportive. You got up, got in your van, and you went to school. You ate; always good food and the cooks were second to none. I especially remember the syrup and the milk. Those two were just phenomenal. But you know, pancakes, eggs; I don't know if we had freedom food, but regular old food.¹¹⁰

Food is a critical piece of understanding OCS and its overall impact on students and the Oakland community. The Party's educational projects that were organized especially for young children began with the Free Breakfast for Children programs. The Panthers were aware that children could not focus on any form of learning if they were hungry, and the free breakfast program worked to address this need. This program served breakfast in the mornings before school, and it was open to any child in the community. The Party eventually expanded beyond the local parameters of Oakland to be implemented in other cities where Black Panther Party chapters were located such as Chicago, Baltimore, and Richmond (VA). In addition to breakfast, the Party also served lunch and dinner for OCS students. Ericka Suzanne voiced the realization and impact that food played not only in the Party, but at OCS: “[There are] two ways to radicalize people:

¹¹⁰ Oral History with Leilah Armour Kirkendoll, October 21, 2020 00:12:48-00:13:20

feeding their mind, body, and souls or denying their mind, body and souls.”¹¹¹ Food is essential for survival. They did everything in their power to care for the *whole* child, this included meals, taking children to dental or vision appointments, to and from school, and more. What mattered most was that students received all that they needed so that all they had to worry about was learning. Food was critical and in the effort to build coalition and community with all oppressed peoples, this included people who were facing poverty. In poverty, one of the primary needs is food among a myriad of other things. In the case of the children, food filled them up physically so that next could come the mind and soul.

To strengthen the OCS educators’ practice of caring for the *whole* child amidst all that students were experiencing inside and outside of the classroom, it was also imperative that they ensured that play was included in the school experiences. Play was a notable site of expression for children at OCS, and in general for youth, because children are able to escape both the formal learning environment and any stressors from home when engaging in play. They often benefit from play time by getting some level of active or passive engagement, but play is also a space that fosters stress relief, imagination and creativity, and empowerment. Making up hand-clap games, using rocks as chalk, playing kickball, reading fairy tales, and the number of other ways that students might engage in activity allows for this informal space to cultivate their holistic development. Particular areas of a child’s development from play include social skills, communication skills, and problem-solving skills especially when playing with other kids at school or in the neighborhood. For Black youth in particular, play is arguably a site of transgression as well because Black youth are often viewed as older than they are or often as a threat that must be reckoned with by discipline and criminalization. Though it is a simple act, in

¹¹¹ *Ibid.* 00:11:55-00:15:00.

a society where Black children are not always able to exist and be seen as just that, children, play becomes transgressive because it can be understood as a site where children employ their agency, creativity, and imagination. Whether it be in their neighborhood or at school, play is also a space where Black children have the potential to show up fully and wholly as themselves.

At OCS, there were many activities students took part in which included swimming, ice skating, roller skating, four-square, double dutch, and kickball. Educators ensured that students would be exposed to a number of activities that could broaden their horizons and tap into interests that they may not have been exposed to otherwise. Academically, students were often challenged, being pushed to do their best and then aiming to do better. But there was a balance of this academic rigor with play time as well. Kesha described the experience as one that felt just like a bunch of relatives and friends and also recalled her experience double dutching where she and her OCS peers integrated their learning with play time:

We'd learn things; like for example, we used to do double dutch. That was a big game. So you say, 'I know my name! I know I'm bad!'...I figured they'd call those things. But we [would] jump in and be doing double dutch, but [would] be singing things. [We] didn't even realize that it was actually algebra [or] algebraic equations that we were saying...So I remember doing that and not even thinking I was learning.¹¹²

Double dutching to algebraic equations was not something that was mandated in the state curriculum nor was it required by the school, but it was certainly a method of learning that for students that they created and embraced. This creative freedom that was fostered in order to support one's learning was only supplemented when pedagogical tools such as "each one teach one" peer to peer learning and critical thinking were incorporated into the way that OCS operated.

¹¹² Oral History with Kesha Hackett, November 11, 2020. 00:09:15-00:13:00.

There were also activities in place that were explicitly encouraged to promote learning during the school day like yoga. Though it may not have been exciting for all of the students, yoga and meditation were encouraged for students especially after very active times of the day such as recess. The incorporation of these mindfulness practices came from the insight of Ericka Huggins. She had benefited from the practice of both yoga and meditation to heal from grief after a series of events that included the assassination of her husband, John Huggins; the wrongful conviction and imprisonment she faced in New Haven (CT); and the impact that the incarceration had on her ability to be with her young daughter as a result of the trial. All these events occurred around the same time and Ericka used yoga and meditation as tools for self-preservation so that she could face those harsh circumstances.¹¹³ She knew how valuable quiet time and centering time could be and suggested for the children to use it at OCS not only after lunch and recess, but also as a resolution tool. Leilah herself recalled a lot of yoga poses, centering, thinking positions, and centering opportunities. These mindful practices were ways to get students' bodies centered so that their minds could be cleared, enabling students to finish out their days.

The act of purposeful movement also showed up in classroom experience as well. Since students were not sorted by grade, but instead by levels, they were in constant movement across learning spaces with students of different ages when deemed appropriate. The instruction was tailored to meet students at the learning level they were at, instead of where they were supposed to be. Grouping students by ability rather than age ensured that the school was a constant flowing space of movement and within the spaces, the “each one, teach one” model was also fostered. If questions came up during class, they were absolutely encouraged by educators. It was an explicit

¹¹³ Oral History with Ericka Huggins, February 2, 2021. 00:49:50-00:53:58.

commitment that OCS taught children how to think, not what to think. This meant that they were not just funneling and depositing information to students as if they were banks. Instead, they were in dialogue with students, asking them questions and encouraging them to ask questions as well.

Bridging the OCS Learning Community with the Greater Oakland Community from the Students' Perspective

Students were also encouraged to avoid taking things at face value at OCS by the educators' emphasis on probing a child's way of thinking. They would not say one thing was good and the other was bad, but they aimed to get to the honest root of a child's opinion. For example, the prevailing belief in education that Christopher Columbus discovered America. If a student agreed or disagreed, a teacher would ask them why and encourage them to think through their reasoning. They might ask, "Well what do you think" to not only hone the child's ability to develop their own perspective, but also empower the student to be confident in themselves and their ability to think critically about prevailing beliefs, even if what they understood to be the truth went against the most popular or patriotic narrative. The tool and approach of investigating expanded beyond issues within the classroom to those outside of the classroom as well. The children were moderately aware of issues that may be perceived as mature for their age, but this occurred because events were playing out in real time outside of the classroom. Even though students ranged from ages 2.5-12, this did not mean that they were entirely oblivious to their surroundings. They witnessed everything from protests in their neighborhood about freeing Huey Newton; reading selected excerpts from *The Black Panther* newspaper in Language Arts class; encountering adverse childhood experiences such as witnessing or experiencing violence and the impacts of systemic racism on their social conditions (racial segregation, economic hardship in

the household, food insecurity, police brutality, etc.). This was exemplified by the mention of Ericka Suzanne's experience with the protest posters in her arts and crafts class in addition to the boycotting of certain food items which aligned with ongoing organizing efforts of Cesar Chavez and the farm workers' union:

We protested everything in our school. There was a whole year when Carol wouldn't let us eat grapes because Cesar Chavez was an associate of the Party and the farm workers' rights was a cause that the Black Panther Party supported. So, for a year, we didn't get to eat grapes.¹¹⁴

Suzanne continued to laughingly and nostalgically describe examples of boycotts that united with the cause of farm workers' rights through the lens of her experiencing it as a child:

I mean like it was never anything good that we boycotted, we only boycotted good stuff. We never boycotted like cabbage. No offense, I just don't like cabbage. We boycotted lettuce [as well] and it was because the school and the Party were aligned with the farm workers' union. We were more than a school.¹¹⁵

Though the pedagogy of the school changed from being especially aligned with the ideals of the Party when it originated, when it shifted away from the ideals to focus more on the educational experiences of children, the overall goal of service to and liberation of oppressed people remained. Students were introduced to activism through creative lenses like food, as Ericka detailed, and also through extracurriculars such as arts and crafts. Suzanne expanded on the connection to the farm workers' union and the cabbage boycott:

Someone [said], "You know Ericka, that's a very good drawing of a cabbage. Your cabbage is pretty." I [was] like "Thank you!", but I [was also] absorbing what the purpose of that sign is. So when you're a child, you're like "I'm making arts and crafts!" But [now I understand I was] also telling a fascist to fuck off.

Drawing and abstaining from the consumption of lettuce was just as revolutionary as those who were on the frontlines. Both acts of boycotting lettuce and creating posters in Art class were

¹¹⁴ Oral History with Ericka Suzanne, September 28, 2020. 00:16:30-00:17:10

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

accessible and intentional methods for students to engage and craft their own understandings of social issues and activism within the greater Oakland area. The field trips that students went on were also examples of this connection to larger social movements and lessons rooted in activism emanating from the Party. Trips included places like the Wonder Bread factory and San Quentin to visit Panthers who were in prison. Though the school was a safe space and a site for education, it was also important that students learned that “it wasn’t us alone; it was us and our community.”¹¹⁶ The motto of the world being a child’s classroom was embodied by the fact activities that students participated in were intentional and grounded at the very core in service and connection to other members of the community.

Service to community and all oppressed peoples was a tenacious guiding principle that was implemented by leaders in the Party and was simultaneously intertwined within the educational experiences of students at OCS. This was evident through Ericka Suzanne’s mention of food boycotts, arts and crafts time, field trips, and weekly movies on Fridays as well as Leilah’s remarks about attending rallies where students sang out chants such as “Free Huey!” or “Justice for Huey!” OCS was certainly a school, but it was also much more than that. It was a site where students were empowered to show up confidently as their full selves, excel academically, and formulate their sense of activism by understanding that power to the people included them *and* their community. When thinking about the role of OCS within the larger community of Oakland, student Leilah Kirkendoll detailed her perspective with great certainty:

Oh honey, to develop activists. To develop an educated citizenry; to develop, remind, and train children to know that they could make a difference. That they could be whatever they wanted to be. That they had a role to play in our own freedom, you know. It didn’t come free; it was a journey, a process. But it was important that we learned that. It was also important that we learned that it wasn’t us alone, that it was us and our community. Free breakfast, free lunch, free food, free rides, voter education, rallies, and all of those things that would push us all to learn to be [activists]...

¹¹⁶ Oral History with Leilah Armour Kirkendoll, October 21, 2020, 00:38:15-00:39:50.

We didn't have time to be petty. We didn't have time to be simple minded. There was a larger picture, a larger space out there that we were a part of and I believe that the school was there to make sure the kids were taken care of number one; to make sure that while they were trying to save everybody else's lives that the children's lives weren't being lost in the balance. But also because I think they thought or felt in their own pedagogy that if they were there, and they provided what students needed, that their kids wouldn't be failed by a system that may have even failed them.¹¹⁷

For students at OCS, school was school, but school was also an avenue to build community and transgress beyond the physical boundaries of the school walls. Understanding class material was important but engaging with the community was just as essential. Students were able to grasp that doing work with and for members of the community was advancing towards the revolutionary goal that was liberation.

The school was a safe haven, but it did not exclude the community in its efforts to sustain that safe space for children. Even families who lived in the community that did not send their kids to OCS were still able to benefit and take part in the support system that was fostered. Suzanne noted how the community valued the Panthers' presence. It would be very hard for anyone to deny the impact of OCS's role in the Oakland community after seeing that children with full bellies were happy and smiling. For example, when Elaine Brown was running for City Council and police and other authorities were complaining, trying to sabotage the campaign, "the community recalled things [like] seeing her [Elaine] at the community food giveaways."¹¹⁸ This amplified the fact that Panthers were committed to and rooted in the community. Community members association and relation to the Panthers was very different from the way police saw the Party and Ericka believed that it was in part due to OCS.

¹¹⁷ Oral History with Leilah Armour Kirkendoll October 21, 2020, 00:19:52-00:22:00

¹¹⁸ Oral History with Ericka Suzanne, September 28, 2020. 00:58:08-00:59:04

Transgressing the Physical Boundaries of OCS to the Greater Oakland Community

Community was what influenced the major ideological shift in the Party in the early 1970s and this shift was marked by going from heavy emphasis on self-defense and militancy to focus more on what the Panthers called community survival programs. In Oakland, this community included a group of people with shared beliefs, interests, values, histories, and identities as well as those who lived within the Oakland area more generally. These programs, in short, were aimed at addressing and eliminating the deficits and unresolved needs within the community. Programs that were offered included free food programs, sickle cell testing, health clinics, free optometry and dental programs, shoe programs, free commissary for prisoners' program, and more. In particular, OCS had educational programs for community members as well. While the new physical space of OCS served to address the overwhelming interest from parents and families, it also operated as a more accessible and central site for other Oakland residents because it was now in the heart of Oakland. The Oakland Community School was for elementary aged children during the business day hours. However, in the evenings and weekends, the larger complex also functioned as a space that was known by the average community member as Oakland Community Learning Center, the larger physical building that housed the school. The Party was responsive to the needs of the people and provided individualized, tailored support according to the needs of community members. Contrary to many of the social programs instituted by the United States federal policy under the New Deal programs started by Roosevelt's administration, the Panthers did not create their community survival programs under regulations that would worsen poverty by excluding people from getting the resources they needed. An example of one of these exclusionary federal policies that were upheld by social welfare programs was the requirement of a family to be means-tested. This had

become a distinct aspect of many social assistance programs created within the broader social welfare system and a major weakness in such programs was the fact that certain services were only available to those whose incomes were low enough or those who could prove that they were not economically stable according to how the state constructed the threshold. It was essentially required that people must have no other means of economic survival. To combat the government induced cycle of a perpetual state of having to survive with these programs, the BPP was intentional about creating mechanisms of assistance that would not surveil and potentially worsen the conditions of community members. If all a family needed was food, they were able to get free food. If people had food at home but needed assistance in accessing dental/vision care, the optometry and dental community survival programs were there to provide the necessary services for free. And if they just wanted to watch a movie to get a break from the daily combat against oppression, that was an option as well. The “revolution” would get nowhere if the people’s basic needs could not be met. The Black Panther Party was intentional about meeting people where they were at, and it was through these avenues that community support was consolidated and amplified.

Learning activities of all sorts were held within the broader space of the building that housed OCS. These events included a broad range of recreations such as film screenings, martial arts, political education classes, and cultural events. Regarding film screenings Ericka Suzanne recalled having movies on Fridays:

The community could come and pay like a quarter and you might get a little bit of popcorn. The cartoon was anti-war, so they’d show us how stupid it was to fight the Vietnamese. We watched this movie [where there was] this character called Billy Jack. Billy Jack was a character who was white, but he said he was Native American. They showed us Billy Jack movies because he went around kicking police in the face. I don’t know what the plots were, but they basically showed us movies that were either Black or

anti-authority. We went to see *Car Wash* and [other] movies that had Black people in them, but also anything that was anti-authority or anti-war.¹¹⁹

Though it may not have been as intensive as a course for political education (for the adults) or a social studies lesson (for the children), the mission and vision of the Party were very much intertwined even in the most minute ways. Whether it be a lesson, program, or an event, everything that the Panthers hosted for the community was intentional, both through the aspect of meeting essential needs that were necessary for physical survival and also through addressing those that fulfilled mental and spiritual survival. Going to the movies is regarded in general as a fun activity or pastime that also promotes leisure.

With OCS now being more central to the Oakland community, it also strengthened the Party's perceived commitment to the people in the local area and this was spearheaded by women who had risen to the Party's leadership. One example of Panther women's advocacy and commitment particularly for community control of education was exemplified by Ericka Huggins in 1975, when *The Black Panther* newspaper documented both she and the Party's views on how the American education system was inadequate for young people. Huggins' detailed in depth about one of the many ways that the educational experience for Black youth had been subpar: the practice of busing. Rather than "busing children from one bad situation to another," Huggins urged it was critical to get to the root of the matter which involved the lack of quality education that was being offered to Black students in their communities.¹²⁰

The issue of busing opened the discussion of other racist U.S. policies that had been instituted and then partially remediated in the mid 20th century such as the issue of school

¹¹⁹ Oral History with Ericka Suzanne, September 28, 2020. 00:22:41-00:23:27

¹²⁰ "Nixon and the Miami Connection." *The Black Panther* 12 No. 24:1-24 (January 4, 1975). San Francisco: Black Panther Party. Black Panther Productions, 1975. 15-16. *Black Thought and Culture Database*. Web.

segregation and its attempted fix via the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (1954)* decision. This ruling was declared by the Supreme Court and unanimously agreed that segregated schools were "inherently unequal" and must be abolished. There were significant upsides and downsides to this legislative decision. One downside being that schools gradually became as segregated as ever. Additionally, this decision had an unfortunate impact and drawback on Black educators. The law did not protect the jobs of Black teachers and administrators and as a result, school desegregation forced dismissal of many Black educators who were previously teaching in all-Black schools. With this lack of protection in tandem with the access of teacher education programs being limited back then, many Black educators were thus disenfranchised and pushed out of schools. This displacement of Black educators worked hand in hand with their replacement by predominantly white educators and this did not help the issue of segregation dissolve. With many Black neighborhoods and communities systematically shapeshifting into communities with high concentrations of poverty, this inherently made them more susceptible to being underdeveloped within the shifting U.S. economy. The Panthers knew this and advocated for community control of schools through projects like the Oakland Community School.

The busing system, though it may have had positive impacts for some students, at the broader level it implied the assumption that in order for a child to receive a quality education they must be bussed out of their local community. This systematically weakened social ties and infrastructural stability within the overall neighborhood because schools are principal landmarks within any neighborhood community. They are one of the primary social institutions, in terms of physical structures, that denote the physical site of a community. Other material sites that build upon the establishment of a neighborhood include homes, churches, post offices, libraries, stores, and more. In an effort to help stabilize the social conditions that people in the area were facing,

the Panthers creation of OCS served to combat these practices that fostered a chronic state of instability especially in urban, predominantly Black communities, such as Oakland, that were facing poverty. According to *The Black Panther*, as a newly elected member of the Alameda County School Board, Ericka Huggins aimed to bring awareness to these issues, as part of the myriad of problems that oppressed people were facing and to the fact that Black people needed control of their schools and decision-making power, among other things.

Children were not always fully cognizant of the background behind events or social conditions. However, the fact that students remember and are able to make connections between certain issues now that they are adults without someone explaining the reason shows that they were aware to some degree. This is evident by Ericka Suzanne's memory of a class discussion on the issue "Why are people hungry in the United States?" From the perspective of adults, they may go into fundamentals or theoretical perspectives when exploring this question by offering insight on factors such as supply and demand, poverty, affordability, and work ethic, among other things. But through the eyes of a child, they tend to tell you exactly what they think and sometimes how they think it should be solved. Ericka's discussion in class settled on greed. An adult or more mature person may think of greed as a characteristic of those in power who are simultaneously functioning as engines of oppression by their unwillingness to reallocate resources. Children, on the other hand, might understand greed by interacting with others who do not want to share. Another example of how the standpoints of children and adults operated as parallel experiences was through communal living. Communal living (in the dorms) was a part of the OCS experience for some students. This was especially true for those who were Panther cubs, because their parents were working 24/7 and fellow Panther members took care of the children in the communal living space that was the dorms. Communal style approaches to living

were also practiced by the Panthers, but this communal ideology also made its way to some of the practices for the broader student body at OCS as well. For example, sharing crayons, markers, books, and other supplies. It may not seem like a big deal, but from the perspective of a child it was significant. Sharing was an essential part to students' understanding of community at OCS.

It was clear that OCS was more than just a school, and this was evidenced by their commitment to making it their job to be acquainted with their parents and relatives so that they could ensure that students were taken care of beyond the school's walls. Oakland Community School did not adopt violent, deficit narratives from American society that denigrated the Black family structure. Nor did they accept ideas that schools endorsed which characterized Black parents as "bad" or not caring about their child's education. They addressed students and their relatives from a strengths-based approach which emphasized valuable attributes and positive characteristics of a family. At the same time, OCS staff members were also forthright from a tough love standpoint if a child's guardians were not making an effort to be accountable for their responsibility to the child's well-being. The Panthers' investment in students' home lives was evident when Ericka Suzanne recounted the story of a young girl who also attended OCS but was often late to school. Educators and administrators at the school learned that her mother was a heroin addict and they got in touch with the parent to let the woman know that she could go get sober while her daughter was being taken care of by them, but she could not be a mother to the young girl and a junkie. The girl came to live at the dorm temporarily, reflecting the fact that parents and families were certain that if they could not cover every single need, their children would be taken care of in those missing areas by the Panthers. Rather than blaming or scolding the mother about her struggles with substance abuse, OCS staff members urged the woman to

seek rehabilitation so that she could show up for her child. They were not afraid to be frank about the risks that come with exposing a child to drugs and addiction and how the neglect impacts the emotional, psychological, and physical well-being of the student. At the same time, educators promoted the mother's agency over the decision to seek help in order to improve the living conditions of herself and the child. This also worked to advance the ideals of self-determination that were interwoven in the Party's political ideology and practices. Additionally, it would not have been unusual for them to offer support by referring the mother to their clinics run by Panthers that offered services for those seeking rehabilitation.¹²¹

Kesha also recalled how the Panthers really leaned in to support community members when detailing about a mother and daughter who were unhoused. In addition to food insecurity, housing insecurity is another factor that severely impacts impoverished families and communities. This insecurity ranges from simply not having a place to stay to having shelter, but due to the economic stressors that exist for individuals who are poor, there may be at a high level of uncertainty about keeping that place due to threats of eviction, restricted allocation of finances, and more. In the case of the mother and young girl who struggled with homelessness, the OCS educators helped to find and secure them a place to stay. The faculty and staff ensured that the reach of the school stretched beyond the campus and that fostered a *sense* of familial kinship and community. Even if the educators were not directly related to the students by kinship, that did not diminish their commitment to care for the students as if they were their own children. They aimed to take care of the *whole* child at OCS, but they were also just as concerned with knowing, uplifting, and supporting the needs of the individual families to which the children belonged.

¹²¹ Bloom, Joshua, and Waldo E. Martin. *Black against Empire: the History and Politics of the Black Panther Party: with a New Preface*. University of California Press, 2016. pp. 188

Conclusion

In early research on the Black Panther Party and even focusing through the lens of women in the Party, it can often be a heavy-laden exchange when remembering experiences and events. For adults, the Party was an organization of which they were a part. Furthermore, many former Panthers may have experienced a sense of loss and under an immense amount of pressure to forget because they had been preparing for the revolution and not so much for what was to come after it. OCS, however, was a beacon of light for not only the Oakland community, but for the Panther's and the students. Memory associated with the school is often joyful and bright in comparison to the heavier emotional toil that accompanies the memories of adult Panthers. Through deep engagement with the subject material with unique pedagogical approaches that emphasized the critical need to intertwine and involve the local community with the educational environment, discussions that affirmed and helped to make sense of lived experiences and raising awareness of their role in the community and their ability to make an impact; children at OCS were empowered. For many students it was remembered as a great time filled with family, love, and purposeful education. They may have been small, but they were also confident in their ability to be mighty contributors to the success of the revolution, whether it be through food, drawing, or taking part in social activism to support their community. OCS educators worked to ensure that the community remained the driving force of the Oakland Community School.

Chapter 4:

Bridging “We” with “I”

Oakland Community School emphasized the need for school-community relations by centering the students’ education within the context of their lived experiences both within and outside of the classroom. Students were developing an understanding of core curricular subjects while also being exposed to civic and community engagement. OCS was inherently a community-based educational space for Black youth especially and it served to deepen the overall learning experience of students; foster trust between students, their families, and local residents in Oakland; and provide awareness of history and sense of place in society for Black people. Educators ensured that this bridge between OCS and the greater Oakland area was nurtured even further by their investment into the family lives of students because they recognized that school, just like family, was a social space where students were growing and developing (physically, emotionally, mentally) within the broader context of their environment. However, embarking upon the process of coming to terms with one’s place as a member of the larger society and accepting it requires cultivating a space where one’s sense of individual identity is also developed. Therefore, how the children understood themselves in their relation to the wider collective and different groups that they belonged to also worked to inform their sense of self as individuals, and this was exceptionally true for students who were Black girls. Considering the broader context of social movements occurring in the United States during the late 20th century and the role of the collective identity instilled via the community at Oakland Community School, the presence of Panther women at Oakland Community School had a substantial impact on the identity formation of young Black girls.

OCS's Approach to Addressing Social Identities in the Educational Environment

The OCS experience entailed a progressive space in which educators and administrators were working to repudiate and eradicate the social processes that normalized the dehumanization of Black youth in the education system. This dehumanization often denied children the ability to access quality schools, to be seen as capable and educable, and prevented their creative genius and criticality from being developed under the guidance of educators. This resistance to supposed norms was critical to the success of OCS overall, but most importantly it was critical for the students themselves. Former educator and director, Ericka Huggins, detailed the informed approach used by OCS in order to provide a more humanizing education for students upon her mention of the auxiliary support provided by community members: "...[they] were people who were concerned with school management that wanted to do it from a feminist perspective in the largest sense of feminism...a feminist perspective as a humane perspective."¹²² This humane perspective was foundational to what the educators at OCS were hoping to implement via their pedagogy and practices. They were navigating, grappling with, and believing in the value of the current reality, cultures, and experiences of the students. When it came to the discussion of different identities that people have, their pedagogical perspective was just as pertinent. Huggins told a story of a time at OCS where she had gotten word that her daughter and three friends had called one of the OCS instructors gay.¹²³ From an educator's perspective, Huggins knew that the four young girls may have not been fully aware about all of the intricacies of sexual orientation and the fluid spectrum of gender identity. When they arrived at her office, they weren't ashamed per se, but because they had gossiped, they were anticipating the subject of the conversation.

¹²² Oral History with Ericka Huggins February 2, 2021. 01:34:25-01:34:47

¹²³ *Ibid.* 01:35:11-01:39:40

Seeing their worried faces, Huggins sensed that they were feeling bad about their gossip and asked them why they were looking so funny. They responded by confirming that they had called an instructor gay because of the pants he wore, and Huggins proceeded to ask them, “Did you investigate?” The girls noted that they had not looked into what it meant to call someone gay or for someone to be gay prior to their gossip. In her approach, Huggins did not demean or chastise the girls for being uninformed. She encouraged them to think about what it meant to be gay and to do some research on their own without publicizing to the school or the instructor about the incident. Huggins detailed the results and her understanding of the situation as well:

They came back and all they could tell me, it was adorable, was “Well some women like women, and some men like or love men, and that’s okay. That’s what we found out, but some people use that term to punish people for how they are.” Also, somebody in that four had remembered someone in their family who was gay [who had been] punished, shamed, or ostracized. She said, “We didn’t want to do that.”

It turned out, I knew that this [instructor] was straight as an arrow; always had been and always would be. But somehow, and it wasn’t his pants, it was something very soft and sweet about him. [There had also been] I believe some kind of conversation left over from public school for [two] of [the students where it] was a common thing thrown around whether you knew what it meant or not.¹²⁴

The education and learning process at Oakland Community School required that all parties (especially students and educators) be actively engaged with the dynamics of their lessons and actions. This example details that being evaluative regarding what students thought, learned, and believed was imperative regardless of if they were discussing the history of enslavement or stereotypes they had been conditioned to believe about different sexual orientations. OCS combatted the reproduction of patriarchal, heteronormative harms that permeated society within the school environment. They did not amplify (or let escalate without intervention through critical inquiry) differential hierarchies in identities such as gender, sexual orientation, or even

¹²⁴ Oral History with Ericka Huggins February 2, 2021. 01:37:45-01:39:02

race as justified reasons to exercise oppression and power; they strongly opposed the default of these mechanisms of power that existed in society and filtered through avenues such as the structural, disciplinary, interpersonal, and hegemonic domains as discussed by Patricia Hill Collins.¹²⁵ OCS was also very broadly in line with the approach of other independent Black institutions that had emerged for Black youth during this time. They aimed to foster this space that was intentionally created to humanize, uplift, and educate students. Furthermore, regarding how students were encouraged to think about complex issues such as gender norms, it was evident that OCS's educators recognized the importance of having a pedagogy that went beyond their method of instruction for the core curriculum:

So, we [taught] that girls could do anything. It didn't matter who you loved. A boy could cry. A boy could hug a girl and a girl could hug a boy and it didn't mean anything except that they are friends. And that nobody should tell you that there is something wrong with how you are. If you're poor, that doesn't mean that your parents neglected or failed you; poverty is systemic.¹²⁶

Huggins' remarks touched on the ways in which gender was typically discussed in the OCS environment. They aimed to transgress the dominating constructions of gender that had been normalized by society by bending it and allowing students the space to do so as well. Considering the impact that this had on students themselves, however, is worth exploring further.

Black Girlhood in Relation to the School Environment

Black girlhood is a theoretical framework that centers the experiences of Black girls in relation to the different environments they move into and throughout. Defined by Charlotte Jacobs as “a space that emphasizes the agency, creativity, and resistance of Black girls,” Black

¹²⁵ Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Routledge, 2009.

¹²⁶ Oral History with Ericka Huggins, February 2, 2021. 01:39:02-01:39:40.

girlhood and the study of it actively seeks to close the rift that has continued to widen and exclude the lives of Black girls from being explored in the broader fields of childhood and girlhood studies.¹²⁷ This is especially important because childhood and what it entails is arguably a social construct that is oftentimes informed by factors such as race and gender. Within the realm of girlhood, when Black girls are refused the ability to participate in activities that usually characterize childhood such as playfulness, imagination, curiosity, and a developing emotional intelligence they are pushed further to margins of being accepted and treated as the children that they are. By centering Black girls in the realm of their childhood, the joys and trials that they experience can be acknowledged with a more critical lens that encourages people to examine how the history of childhood and youth have been represented and contextualized through the intersections of race, gender and age.

Similar to Black women regarding the social constructions of attributes such as femininity, womanhood, and motherhood, the dominant narrative of what constitutes girlhood is typically ascribed to that of whiteness. This omission requires us to consider using constructions and theories such as Black womanhood and Black feminism as guiding frameworks to begin to understand Black girlhood. Regarding womanhood, there has always been racial differences attributed to womanhood and society's views of what is considered respectable, innocent, and ladylike. Black feminism has its premise based on the awareness and consciousness of how race, class, and gender intersect as tripling forms of oppression in Black women's lives. However, attaching Black womanhood and Black feminism as theoretical frameworks is also limited because even though they provide an important contextual analysis for how society constructs Black femininity, an overemphasis on Black feminism and Black womanhood can act as a

¹²⁷ Halliday, Aria S. *The Black Girlhood Studies Collection*. Women's Press, an Imprint of CSP Books Inc., 2019. pp. 29

double-edged sword. Conceptualizing Black girlhood solely through the lens of the former frameworks has the potential to compress Black girls' experiences and subject them to the process of adultification and an accelerated refusal to view them as children.¹²⁸

Understanding how Black girlhood has existed in society allows us to critically analyze how they have been mapped in different social environments such as schools. The environmental context of schools has immense power on the livelihood and social dynamics of Black children and girls especially. Teachers, administrators, students, and additional personnel all contribute to the school environment. As mentioned in previous chapters, schools are mirrors of the society in which they are located. When Black people are over-policed, over criminalized, and dehumanized in society, these same systems are typically molded within the realities that Black children are forced to confront in schools. These environments are also where adolescents are constrained, managed, and policed against white students and white feminine ideals and norms in particular are used to limit the freedom of Black girls.¹²⁹ Though the reproduction of racist practices may be systemic, it does not make them justifiable, and it affects Black girls and limits their ability to recognize that they belong. Exploration of the history of Black girlhood has been rendered by scholars as difficult because it has been challenging to find and because the “time-specific categorization” of girlhood does not often portray Black girls as such.¹³⁰ Though limitations such as memory and age exist, the fact that Black women can shift spaces between their experiences as Black girls in the past and their contemporary lives as women in the present has allowed me to consider how the experiences of Leilah, Ericka Suzanne, and Kesha--who

¹²⁸ Halliday, Aria S. *The Black Girlhood Studies Collection*. Women's Press, an Imprint of CSP Books Inc., 2019. pp. 7-8

¹²⁹ Franklin-Phipps, Asilia. “Entangled Bodies: Black Girls Becoming-Molecular.” *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies*, vol. 17, no. 5, 2016, pp. 384–391., doi:10.1177/1532708616674993.

¹³⁰ Halliday, Aria S. *The Black Girlhood Studies Collection*. Women's Press, an Imprint of CSP Books Inc., 2019. pp. 6

were Black girls during their time at OCS and are now Black women--developed within the broader social context of social movements of the late 20th century. Localizing Black girlhood within this time period allows for a deeper understanding of the historical, contemporary, and future need for theorizing of Black girlhood especially as it relates to the educational environment.

OCS's Impact on the Identity Formation of Students

Kwame Ture's exclamation of "Black Power" marked a significant shift in the mass movements of organizing for Black freedom and liberation in the 1960s. It transformed the strategies and themes surrounding organizing to that of an arguably more radical, active approach at making strides towards liberation for Black people. People wanted more than equality and equal rights within the realm of the American government. They wanted liberation and in pursuit of this liberation they were determined to challenge the stance of nonviolence and the country's loophole to moderate and manage equality via litigation. In this shift from focusing on rights to amplifying the need for power, politics, and liberation, the Black Power era inspired the creation of many organizations and also other movements. With this in mind, we can consider how the Black Panther Party's emergence under Black Power intersected with the creation of Oakland Community School which fell under the tradition of radical Black, independent institutions that were created in an effort to provide students with a better education than what they had been receiving from the public school system. To examine the results of whether or not OCS impacted students in the ways they intended, we can consider the perspective of how the school and interactions with educators at the school impacted students and their experiences. More specifically, due to the rise in power of women in the Party's leadership, it is especially worth noting if Panther women at OCS played a role in the students'

overall experience as well. Based on the experiences of three former OCS students, it is clear that OCS and the presence of Panther women in leadership at the school and in the Party at large influenced the identity formation of young Black girls at the school especially by the cultivation of their racial consciousness, sense of self, and leadership efficacy.

Racial Consciousness

Focusing on the Black Panther Party, and women in particular, their expansion into community-based educational initiatives such as the Oakland Community School was steered in large part by women in the Party. During this time, women were grappling with the critical examination of identity politics amidst the organizing. Their experiences with discrimination on the basis of race, class, gender, heavily informed their approach to formal and grassroots political organizing. Regarding race, organizers aimed to be “...united in their declaration of a new militant racial consciousness and [they were] driven by the collective goal of creating a new Black identity.”¹³¹ Uplifting people’s beliefs and awareness about their race went against the dominant narratives that American society had constructed because up until that point, many scientists had also biologized race as a matter of inherent, genetic inferiority.¹³² Thus, beyond it being solely a matter of racial pride, Black Power also symbolized survival by its raising the racial consciousness of Black people to combat the systemic inculcation of inferiority that had impacted people’s minds, bodies, and souls. An exploration of the emergence and execution of alternative Black schools that were intentionally created as “conscious attempts to transcend rhetoric and create enduring mechanisms of consciousness and resistance,” works to examine the

¹³¹ Farmer, Ashley D. *Remaking Black Power: How Black Women Transformed an Era*. University of North Carolina Press, 2019. pp. 12

¹³² Smedley, Audrey. “‘Race’ and the Construction of Human Identity.” *American Anthropologist*, vol. 100, no. 3, 1998, pp. 690–702. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/682047.

expansive reach of the Black Power era beyond political and grassroots organizing to their impact on youth.¹³³ Therefore consideration of how the environment of OCS impacted the development of students racial consciousness is imperative being that the school was created by the BPP which also emerged under this umbrella of Black Power and the rise of independent Black educational spaces. I have defined racial consciousness as the awareness of one's racial identity which includes the social construction and reality of categorization that is heavily based on physical, cultural, and symbolic meanings.

Student, Ericka Suzanne, recalled being profoundly impacted in the area of racial consciousness as a Black girl due to the school's pedagogy, ideology, and practices:

It's funny because we knew about racism...we talked about it. [But] we weren't experiencing it...The Party created a bubble that so sheltered me from the ills that gave rise to the Party, that if someone had asked me as a child, "Why does the Party exist?" I would be like, "I don't know. I don't know what it's like to be hungry. I don't know what it's like to be judged for being a woman. I don't know what's like to be judged for being Black. I know that these things happen, but it ain't happening here."¹³⁴

OCS was deliberate in their efforts to steer clear of perpetuating the ills of society. They were aware that the public school system was dismissive and oftentimes neglectful regarding the needs--academic, emotional, social, etc.--of Black children. They ensured that students would have the ability to have high quality education while also being taken care of as human beings who were growing and developing, socially, emotionally, and mentally. It was truly a holistic approach because they were educating the mind, feeding the body, and together this filled the soul. Similar to the discussion guided by Ericka Huggins regarding sexual orientation, the overarching method of critical inquiry encouraged students to also think deeply about race:

¹³³ "Introduction: Education, Black Power, and the Radical Imagination." *We Are An African People: Independent Education, Black Power, and the Radical Imagination*, by Russell John Rickford, Oxford University Press, 2019, pp. 6

¹³⁴ Oral History with Ericka Suzanne September 28, 2020 00:59:41-01:00:13

I didn't think in terms of my own Blackness because I just saw African-Americans as people who embrace and belong to the system. And Black people, as I'm Black and I was raised by Black people, we have no vested interest in the system and the way it's currently constructed. So the idea that you accept it and you want to make small changes is not how the school raised us. The school raised us to make big changes...so much Blackness was being in the Black Panther Party and then relating to African Americans.

...and that might be why I don't refer to myself...like the idea of calling myself African American because of the American part. Then it also reminds me that I have no idea where in Africa. So then that makes me mad again because it's the American's fault that I don't know. So I'm like "Black." Also because we said "Black Power". We didn't say "African American Power."¹³⁵

Ericka Suzanne's reflections demonstrated that the Black/African American identity as a whole is very complex. Suzanne's sentiments about the relation to the African continent and how the severed thread influenced the personhood and ancestry of people within the diaspora also aligned with an ideal rooted in Black Power which asserted: 1) it should not be left up to the state to define one's citizenship, 2) the need to redefine what it meant to be Black in America, and 3) the state could not continue to diminish one's consciousness of who they were. Even further, the internal conflict about identifying as Black or African American exhibited the Black Power era's "renascent idea that African Americans were a subject nation, an 'internal colony' that needed to claim intellectual and cultural autonomy before achieving true liberation through formal statehood or community self rule."¹³⁶ Her understanding of racial consciousness as a young Black girl as a result of the school's environment allowed Suzanne to become aware of how her racial identity was driven by self-definition and agency where she could be "Black on purpose." Moreover, Suzanne acknowledged how this influenced her contemporary perception of her identities of being Black and a woman as "neck and neck."¹³⁷

¹³⁵ Oral History with Ericka Suzanne, September 28, 2020 01:36:42-01:40:20.

¹³⁶ "Introduction: Education, Black Power, and the Radical Imagination." *We Are An African People: Independent Education, Black Power, and the Radical Imagination*, by Russell John Rickford, Oxford University Press, 2019, pp. 2

¹³⁷ Oral History with Ericka Suzanne, September 28, 2020 01:43:06-01:44:09.

To expand, some students even recalled not realizing that they were Black until they left the school. This is important because it is not referring to Black in terms of their self-defined identities or racially as Black youth, but Black in the sense of how Blackness exists within the overarching structures of power, inequality, oppression, and white supremacy within the United States and the globe. This was especially true if students had attended since they were 2.5 years old, because they had never experienced the symbolic and systemic violence on their personhood that often exists in the U.S. education system. It was not that students did not know that they were visibly Black. They did not assume the inferior, deficit mindset about their Black identity that society asserts through the broader context of identities being social determinants for accessing basic resources such as housing, education, or food. Their racial awareness was not built on the basis of discrimination and hate; nor was it the determining factor of one's overall quality of life. There were also times when students' sense of racial consciousness was further developed in ways that were more taxing once they had left Oakland Community School. Student, Leilah Kirkendoll, emphasized that her educational experience in relation to the development of her racial consciousness as a Black girl was a bit challenging due to social interactions and racial dynamics that came into play in different schools. She emphasized this when she stated,

...it wasn't the education that was the problem. It was the social interaction that I was having an issue with. I just didn't know how to be around white folks. I was like, "Where all these white people come from? What am I supposed to do with these people?" They were so different, and they thought I was so different. So, we were [probably] equally traumatized.¹³⁸

When encountering people who had been conditioned to think certain things about the race of others in addition to the systemic policies that had been created on the basis of race, it was

¹³⁸ Oral History with Leilah Armour Kirkendoll, October 21, 2020. 00:33:05- 00:33:56.

certainly a challenging adjustment for students in other learning environments outside of OCS. Although the environment of OCS developed the racial consciousness of students in a radical way, a considerable drawback included the fact that students would eventually have to leave and face the harsh reality of how race was constructed in society as a justification for discrimination. However, this did not diminish the value of OCS's consideration of racial consciousness development for students, rather it amplified the fact that the public school system had in fact needed to be improved and this was for the benefit of all students' awareness of race within the United States.

Sense of Self

The age of the average member in the Black Panther Party ranged from 19-21 years old, so the so-called adults in the organization were young. They were also within enough age proximity to remember their youth experience and were well aware of how it influenced their consciousness as young adults. With this in mind, it was critical that they ensured that Black children felt confident in themselves and their identities at OCS and this was put into practice through affirmations, pedagogical and social practices, curricular representation, and by the presence of Black educators themselves. Most youth in the U.S. come into contact with the school system in some way, shape, or form during their lifetime. In addition to how people are socialized at home and in their communities, individual experiences at schools inform how they enter broader spaces of childhood and adulthood. In the case of OCS, affirming the students' Black identity combatted the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes in society and forced students to realize that Black people and Black communities were not monoliths.

OCS students felt especially empowered regarding their knowledge and foundational learning skills. This sense of empowerment derived from the educators' commitment to provide them with information based on what the teachers themselves felt should be incorporated in the curriculum, but most importantly what students asked about. For example, if they were curious about why the sky was blue or if they wanted to know why their parents were treated so badly by police, teachers at OCS would tailor a lesson to guide students to come to an answer based on both the teachers' and the students' input in the discussion. It was felt strongly by students that Oakland Community School was a very empowering space that nurtured their minds in terms of knowledge and understanding, but the school also empowered students in their overall growth in their sense of self. For the purpose of this chapter, I have defined sense of self as: raising the awareness of one's individual identity, thoughts, and beliefs in an effort to ultimately reveal an understanding of their relation to and position within the context of society at large; the ability for an individual to recognize where they fit and have potential to make change in society; and inquiry and self-discovery that is also characterized by self-definition. Additionally, this includes the awareness of who one is outside of the different structures and systems that they interact with in society. Students felt confident in themselves at varying levels -- racially, individually, and as valued community members. This was grounded in the assurance that their needs would be met and through having their identities affirmed by their educators and one another. Educators recognized this based on their own experiences and those of children in the community and they were determined to create a space where students' brilliance and creativity could shine.

Student, Kesha Hackett, noted how impactful the OCS experience was on her understanding of self as a Black girl: "...knowledge of self...self-esteem, it informs you and it makes you better poised and able to handle things...you know that you're more than an enslaved

person”¹³⁹ Affirmations in and of themselves are powerful--it supports well-being, self-esteem, confidence, and more with positive self-talk. The Party’s belief in critical need to affirm Black youth stemmed back to their original educational program, free breakfast for children. Kesha spoke of how that feeling of empowerment that was woven within the OCS experience built a foundation of resilience in students. OCS ensured that young Black children were told and shown that they were worth something in this world. This was a radical practice of adapting in the face of adversity, amidst the hostile racial and social climate that plagued mid to late 20th century American society and that had also been mirrored within schools.

During her time as an OCS student, Hackett also recalled a time that the Panther women embodied an ethics of care practice regarding hair as a part of her identity. This “ethics of care” is defined by Smooth and Richardson as “a feminist moral perspective and form of political action that centres on interpersonal relationships and expressing concern for others as both care providers and care receivers.”¹⁴⁰ This care went deeper than the educational experience and its impact on her experience as a young Black girl:

I remember one time, I asked my mom if I could comb my own hair and I didn't do that well. So that week, I was combing my own hair and then it happened to be picture day. So one of the instructors was like, "Okay. Come here," and so she got my hair together in a little two ponytails and made it nice. I'm not sure if any other teacher would do that any other place, but it was that kinship, family community environment from the Oakland Community School, which I'll never forget.¹⁴¹

The care instructors had for students included every inch of their being. This was similar to the narrative shared by Ericka Huggins about Kellita’s experience from Chapter 2, in the fact that

¹³⁹ Oral History with Kesha Hackett, November 11, 2020. 00:24:24-00:25:20; 00:46:11-00:47:01

¹⁴⁰ Halliday, Aria S. *The Black Girlhood Studies Collection*. Women's Press, an Imprint of CSP Books Inc., 2019. pp. 153

¹⁴¹ Oral History with Kesha Hackett, November 11, 2020. 00:05:51-00:06:24.

OCS educators took that extra step to tend to the young Black girls' hair. The politics of hair is important when thinking about the experiences of Kesha and Kellita. This progressive educational environment, rooted in Black Power, was encouraged and experienced by everyone involved -- educators and students alike. Even though it was Black women specifically that did the girls' hair, it is saying something about the bridge between the political, personal, and symbolic significance of hair that they were willing to tend the girls' hair even in the school environment. They recognized that hair, especially for young Black girls, went deeper than appearance. It had the potential to impact their sense of self and overall confidence. Even further, hair was often used as a tool by women during the Black Power era to express their pride and politics. The Afro in particular functioned as a method of political awareness on one part, but also symbolic in that it was refusing to submit to the paradigm of beauty standards constructed in whiteness. For women and men, this "aesthetic practice inscribed in everyday life" had represented an awareness of the need for self-preservation and also an external sense of solidarity with the politics of the ongoing social movement, thus it cannot be minimized solely to the level of self.¹⁴² For Black girls in the school environment, this is important and the role of hair in Black girlhood was emphasized by Moore and Brown when they detailed the expressive nature of hair:

Playing with expressive mediums of beauty and fashion also provides an opportunity to engage in mindfulness and self-actualization, processes essential to bolstering the positive socio-emotional development of children...Black hair, then offers a modality in which to illuminate the negative societal connotations of Blackness...while also considering how hair provides a vehicle in which to cultivate self-love to counter such depictions.¹⁴³

¹⁴² Mercer, Kobena. "Black Hair/Style Politics." *new formations*. no. 3, 1987 pp. 33-53

¹⁴³ Halliday, Aria S. *The Black Girlhood Studies Collection*. Women's Press, an Imprint of CSP Books Inc., 2019. pp. 114; 213

Though hair and the styling of it can function as an expression of one's politics or beliefs, there is also an intrinsic expression of identity, personal agency, and creative expression for children. Styling Black hair is resistance against hegemonic white beauty standards. Just as Black girlhood, Black womanhood, and other expressions of Black femininity, it actively works to challenge the paradigm that centers whiteness as the only acceptable aesthetic archetype. When Kesha tried to do her own hair and when Kellita came to school with her hair braids undone, both girls were engaging with that process of hair as an avenue to self-actualization and positive socio-emotional development in their youth. The fact the educators even cared to style the girls' hair, showed that they recognized the impact that it would have on the young girls' confidence and sense of self which was already oftentimes undervalued and overlooked. This is also not simply a matter of hair care in that they needed a hair salon in school, but with schools so often being a place where disciplinary power is enforced to police the identities of Black children and their self-expression such as language and dress, hair is just as policed and this surveillance of identity impacts youth. Lastly, as a result of this constant care for the humanity and lives of OCS students, even amidst the educational rigor of OCS, Kesha noted how she felt a deep influence from the representation of Black women (Panthers and non-Panthers) in leadership at Oakland Community School. She recalled that seeing positive, strong Black women was good to see. It made her feel like she could do things that would impact the world too.

Leadership Efficacy

Speaking of impacting the world, Kesha was not the only student who felt power in the presence of Black women in leadership at Oakland Community School and within the larger Party. It was sensed by former OCS student, Leilah Kirkendoll, as well:

I think that it is a very empowering space to think that everyone in your immediate surrounding is there to make sure you have everything you need. I don't know that I felt like that again since I left that situation, since I left that environment...It was just very identity developing -- very much Black is beautiful, Black Power, young, gifted, and Black.

[You felt like] you're worth it, you're worth the investment, you're worth our time, you're worth our energy. We're giving everything we have to you...Everyone did what they needed to do and made it happen for you. You saw that because your parents were constantly working for the movement and you rarely saw them on the weekends, but there was always this reminder that they're doing this for you. They're doing this for us. So you do your part, let them do theirs.¹⁴⁴

Leilah's remarks provided a testament to all three factors noted regarding the identity formation of OCS students that was detailed earlier in this chapter. From the perspective of OCS students, and especially those who attended as young Black girls, the rising presence of women in leadership at OCS and within the Party influenced the cultivation of their racial consciousness, sense of self, and leadership efficacy. It is important to note that there was a direct relation felt by the power of influence from women in leadership in the Party as well. Similar to Kesha, Leilah also felt that it was good to see women in those spaces and felt that it had potential to also impact the ways young Black girls carried themselves. Seeing women in power and knowing that they were the backbone of the Party did not go unnoticed and for Kirkendoll, it "encourage[d] her heart and mind towards that leadership, self-confidence, [ability to be] in charge, running stuff."¹⁴⁵ With women filling leadership roles in the Party during the Black Power era, this image pushed against the masculinist norms of political and social movements and especially those that crafted the controlling images of what the BPP was.

Panther women being in leadership looked a variety of ways, but together, their leadership was intertwined by two approaches. Women in the BPP's leadership blended the

¹⁴⁴ Oral History with Leilah Armour Kirkendoll October 21, 2020. 00:14:09-00:15:15; 00:18:20-00:19:13

¹⁴⁵ Oral History with Leilah Armour Kirkendoll, October 21, 2020. 00:29:58 00:30:52.

impact of formal politics--which entailed navigating government at the “local, state, and national level[s]...through elections”--and grassroots politics which were driven directly by the needs of the community members that the Party intended to serve.¹⁴⁶ Examples of the formal consisted of: the rank-and-file due to the hierarchical set up of the Central Committee which at one point included women like Ericka Huggins, Elaine Brown, Norma Armour, and others; Elaine Brown’s run for City Council in 1972; and Ericka Huggins’ election to the Alameda County Board of Education. The grassroots lens, though interwoven through the Party’s ideology, was exemplified as a method of women’s leadership that displayed most visibly through the community survival programs; the medical clinics, free breakfast for children’s programs, and more. This mix of formal and grassroots politics engaged by women in the Party emphasized the progressive gender outlook that Panther women had and stressed the critical importance of using your knowledge and natural gifts for service to your community. How this impacted young Black girls is important to consider because it fostered a sense of political efficacy, “a sense that one not only has the ability to identify the need for change, but also the power to do something to realize change.”¹⁴⁷ With research that has expanded to include the literal power and deep impact that women had on the Black Panther Party, it would be remiss not to consider the impact that this had on young Black girls who were seeing the Black women in action. Thus exploring this gendered leadership dynamic in relation to OCS, an environment created intentionally to provide an alternative education for students which was also operated in large part by women in the Party, as well as consideration of the how representations of Black women in leadership influenced young Black girls as OCS allows for an understanding of the Panther women’s impact

¹⁴⁶ Halliday, Aria S. *The Black Girlhood Studies Collection*. Women's Press, an Imprint of CSP Books Inc., 2019. pp. 153

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

on young girls' consciousness of leadership, what it looks like, who can do it, and how it has a direct impact within the lives of people around them.

Conclusion

OCS students were used to observing social interactions amongst different groups outside of the norms that society had constructed. Women in leadership roles such as director of OCS and chairman of the Black Panther Party or men as teachers and cooks; this created a progressive environment for the children. However, outside of the bubble that was the Black Panther Party, things were different. Realizing one's potential for leadership, racial consciousness and feelings of self-empowerment, did not protect students once they left because as Leilah stated, the rest of the world did not operate like that. Thus, even though representation of women in leadership was positive, that did not protect the women from discrimination and sometimes put them at risk of it due to the ways that gender roles and norms had been conditioned from people's backgrounds and from society. Becoming aware of this dichotomy between what OCS had amplified in comparison to what American society upheld presented initial challenges for students upon their departure from OCS and entrance into the broader U.S. public school system, but it also enriched their critical thinking skills. Rather than accepting problematic societal norms around peoples' identities or accepting a single narrative of history as fact, students held fast to their critical thinking skills. This inquiry-based mindset promoted their learning and lived experiences both within and outside of the classroom. It provided them an outlook on their identities and capabilities to impact their community and the world.

A Legacy: OCS's Impact on the Lives of Former Students

In addition to its benefit for the children, the school also advanced the impact and image of the Black Panther Party itself. Ericka Suzanne noted that “the school was the thing that told people the Panthers weren’t what the police said they were.”¹⁴⁸ They were not a gang or a simple organization with a selfish political agenda. The Black Panther Party was invested in their communities as well. In addition to their political and grassroots organizing, the Party aimed to remain consistent in advancing a class struggle that would unite Black people and all people who were oppressed. Though they amplified this during their duration, the violence and targeted suppression from the government in their efforts to neutralize the Party ultimately eclipsed any perception that society would have known about their community organizing efforts. This makes it all the more critical that the history and legacy of the Party and their differing impacts on the Oakland community continues to be unearthed. The Oakland Community School provides one glimpse into how the impact of the Party is a lot more complex than what has been shared in the dominant narrative.

Legacy of OCS in Students' Eyes

OCS was purposeful about education, content, and pedagogy, but they were also intentional about that social process that is so pertinent to the educational environment. Educators aimed to foster the socialization process of students at OCS so that it was not riddled with the remnants of structural inequality, systemic racism, and oppression that had unfortunately permeated the public schools during that time. In the eyes of former Oakland Community School students, the educational experience was memorable and for many students it

¹⁴⁸ Oral History with Ericka Suzanne, September 28, 2020. 00:49:35-00:52:10

impacted them for the rest of their lives. Students often compared the OCS experience to their new school experiences, employing the tools and skill sets that they'd gained at OCS within their new school environments and beyond. The critical thinking, importance of community, and the confidence instilled through the development of students' self-awareness were not values that were meant to stay contained within the OCS environment. These values were transferable tools that could be applied in many other areas of students' lives. Former student Leilah Kirkendoll emphasized how the incorporation of these strategies such as critical thinking peer accountability via the justice board played out in real time as OCS students in addition to how the lessons learned were significant long after they left as well:

I do remember being well-rounded, well versed. As a kid, I did not necessarily like that because that took work. It was a lot of work to read and to think and to reason around things. But it was in every aspect of your life. So you had to give it some thought and some energy, for lack of a better term.

...as a kid, you just felt like, "So-and-so is telling me what to do," but the reality was you played a role in it. We call it restorative practice now, but, you played a role in it. You harmed someone and you have to take your responsibility for it, whatever that looks like. And the adults [are] not going to always be the ones [who] have to do it. It will oftentimes be a jury of your peers. It will oftentimes be you having to tell your friend or [whoever], what or [what] not to do.¹⁴⁹

This peer accountability model shows up most prominently in areas such as jury duty for adults, grassroots community organizations, and even the workplace. Educators at OCS did not want the children to be passive learners, nor did they want them to be passive community members. Being engaged with one another through the different initiatives under the Youth Committee fostered a sense of agency and also a sense of responsibility to peers in the learning community. Students had the opportunity to think through decisions as peers within the student collective, but they always had adults there for guidance. This creative agency provided them a chance to essentially

¹⁴⁹ Oral History with Leilah Armour Kirkendoll October 21, 2020. 00:22:57-00:24:29

experiment and take part in the development of skills such as problem solving or collaboration before embarking upon it and applying it to real situations in their future adult lives.

Although Oakland Community School students did not confront the level of trauma faced by many adults in the Black Panther Party, most students did face some level of trauma upon their departure from the school. The transition out of the learning community at Oakland Community School was not always easy. The very fact that many students referred to the experience at OCS as one where they were *raised*, rather than a physical place that they simply *attended*, made salient the community and familial aspects that were embedded in the pedagogy, ideology, and practices at OCS. When OCS said they cared for the *whole* child, they meant it and did all that they could to accomplish this goal. This worked to meet any immediate needs such as food or health care, but to also meet the need of providing a humanizing education where minds and spirits were also taken care of. OCS was not just a site of learning because they aimed to create a sense of belonging, a sense of safety, and a space of refuge for children in Oakland.

When students left Oakland Community School, it was often due to aging out at eleven years or at the discretion of their parents/respective kindred family members. The geographical and spatial shift from the OCS environment to other schools differed from student to student, but it was collectively regarded as a culture shock that impacted the educational experiences of the students. For example, at OCS, students were encouraged to question, critique, and challenge the ways of the world by thinking deeply about topics discussed in and outside of class. However, many students quickly learned that they had to “play the game” in order to advance in their academic journeys.¹⁵⁰ That inquisitive thinking, students’ feeling empowered in their voice, and

¹⁵⁰ Oral History with Kesha Hackett, November 11, 2020. 00:11:37-00:13:00

awareness regarding history beyond what their textbooks taught would not benefit students in any way academically based on how the United States education system was operating. They simply needed to be able to regurgitate what they had been told on a test. This fostered a new educational environment that entailed students withholding their voices, imagination, and creativity in order to advance throughout their educational journey. Leilah also described how the Party's end negatively impacted some students even beyond the realm of their educational experiences:

...for a long time we wanted to ignore our part in the Party. Right now, it's really hip to be in the Party, but 20-30 years ago, that wasn't real hip. That wasn't cool, that wasn't good. So we kind of ignored it for a long time and by the time people were ready to talk about it, there was nobody to talk about it with, because where was everybody that was with you?

...it was a lot happening, it was a lot of trauma too and you didn't realize that at the time because you were a kid, but you think about it now and you're like, "God, what happened to so-and-so?" A lot of people committed suicide [because] some people could not live in the world outside of that.¹⁵¹

Though students had not been official members of the BPP, they were affiliated. The departure of adult members of the BPP had not been a simple undertaking. For many members of the Black Panther Party, exiting the Party in a relaxed, easygoing manner was oftentimes rare. Many fled in a hurry, some escaped into exile, and a number of people were sentenced to prison, if not murdered by police. While the circumstances for children were different, it manifested instead as being silent about what school you had come from, where you lived, and possibly who your parents were. This shift was also traumatic because it involved moving from an environment that ensured every need was met to some that may not have been as deeply invested in their education, community, or basic humanity.

¹⁵¹ Oral History with Leilah Armour Kirkendoll October 21, 2020. 01:03:37-01:04:58

OCS's Impact on the Students' Professional Journeys

All three students interviewed for this project felt that OCS had an influence on them beyond their youth. Specifically regarding their professional careers, they believe OCS is still impacting them in the present day. Kesha emphasized how the school's priority of knowledge of self and critical thinking skills ran deep. Hackett asserted how that "knowledge of self and self-esteem informs you and makes you better poised and able to handle things, even in corporate America." Any experiences that she may have faced in the trajectory of her career, she was seldom discouraged. Hackett knew that she was just as qualified, and sometimes more due to her education, as the next person. But this also made her very aware of issues such as racial differences in hiring for Human Resources. She has seen throughout her 25 years thus far in corporate America how even though she had worked to get her graduate credentials, there were also white people who were higher up with less education. This self-awareness has not only preserved her mind, but it has made her better equipped to deal with inequities.¹⁵² So even if she faced adversity, she knew that she could be in a group of whomever--men, women, white, etc.--and have no doubt about whether or not [she] belongs because she is confident that she has earned the right to be there.

Leilah's professional career journey was impacted by the values she knew that she would have embedded within her work. She always knew that she was going to be helping people in whatever she did as a future career. At OCS, it was always encouraged through different avenues that students help each other and those around them and this stuck with Kirkendoll. Her exact choice of career was not linear and Kirkendoll noted that she went from wanting to be an accountant in Human Resources, Social Work, and then Criminal Justice to prison reform. She

¹⁵² Oral History with Kesha Hackett, November 11, 2020. 01:12:16-01:13:18

ended up going into social services by working at a group home for pregnant teens and foster youth and this ultimately steered her into the path of education. She had experience teaching in formal schools, but eventually widened her reach and taught at a juvenile prison camp for boys. Kirkendoll remarked that teaching in this nontraditional education setting has also allowed her the opportunity to “use the pedagogy [she’d been raised with] all of her life.”¹⁵³ Bridging her interests in education, criminal justice, and helping people, Kirkendoll pursued her PhD in Educational Leadership in which her dissertation focused on African American girls who pursued baccalaureate degrees despite childhood traumas. She now works at the district level of San Diego County Office of Education’s Juvenile Court and Community Schools. Keeping service to others central, Leilah was aware and remained steadfast in her career goals to help others and give back to her community.

Similar to Leilah, Ericka Suzanne emphasized how OCS influenced her understanding of helping others by uplifting the value of social responsibility as it related to one’s educational and career pursuits. OCS educators had exemplified the importance of education as a tool that would ultimately benefit your community. Beyond the role that it played in increasing the knowledge of the individual, education also served the purpose of improving the conditions of the lives of those around you. This value was so deeply embedded that it also filtered from its application to one’s educational journeys to their career journeys. Many jobs that students pursued embodied this ideology of education as a means to be of service to your people and this also created limits on jobs that were deemed as acceptable. For example, working with a company who fails to consider ethical responsibility and exploits the labor of their workers. Though this type of job is highly probable and even difficult to avoid for people due to the current state of economic affairs

¹⁵³ Oral History with Leilah Armour Kirkendoll October 21, 2020. 00:49:12-00:49:48

in the world, it would clash with OCS and the Party's roots in fighting against the oppressive power structure. Suzanne felt that this was also made salient because of the OCS's impact in the Oakland area during the time that it was operating. They were not aiming to exploit community members, rather they worked to meet their need and aid in their literal survival amidst the harsh social and economic conditions that many people were facing. Thus, it was important to be conscious of personal values and boundaries, how they aligned with a particular job, and how that job ultimately impacted others.

Ericka also stressed the role of family that was foundational to Oakland Community School experience. Going beyond the political sphere of the BPP, OCS had also surpassed the physical and educational space that it existed within: "It's not a political party for us, for us it's a family...we were a school, but we were a family."¹⁵⁴ With this, she recalled through her memories of the murder of Huey Newton. When Newton was murdered in 1989, she was attending Spelman College. Her roommate happened to be a former OCS student as well, and she found solace in her roommate because the impact went deeper than Newton's death for them. It was at that point that Suzanne had felt that the revolution that she had always been told she was born for was far in the distance. She was not only in grief, but now had to wonder about what she was supposed to do when the revolution never came. Though they had been miles away from Oakland at that point, that familial component that had been fostered at OCS had once again provided a sense of refuge for former OCS students long after the school had closed its doors.

Despite the close of OCS upon the Black Panther Party's dissolution, Ericka did relay that she felt that some OCS elements have filtered into some spaces of education today. Besides

¹⁵⁴ Oral History with Ericka Suzanne September 28, 2020 00:37:36-00:37:55; 01:23:30-01:23:45

the federal government's adoption of free breakfast in schools, Ericka recognized the presence of OCS in two specific ways. The first was through the rise of school gardens and green areas that are implemented at schools located in densely populated cities. While eco-gentrification is a very real social issue, green spaces tend to benefit the quality of a neighborhood as well as the health of residents who live there. However, specifically focusing on schools, when they are able to create these spaces as sites of exploration for students in the respective learning community, it extends the classroom to outside where students have the option to engage with hands-on learning within their environment. OCS had a garden and the science house as well, and this broadened the areas that kids could imagine, create, and learn in. Planting seeds to watch flowers, fruits, or vegetables grow; looking at how worms come out after it rains; with gardens, youth who live in areas that are systematically deprived of green spaces are able to be engaged with lessons and play outdoors in ways that they might not have otherwise been able to. The second way that Ericka has seen elements of OCS in the present day was by the vision behind LeBron James' I Promise school in Akron, OH.¹⁵⁵ She noted that despite critiques of the school, the incorporation of elements like a food pantry, laundry services, and job and educational support for parents made the thread undeniable. Though the approach and framework of the two schools were different, Ericka sees an effort to center that *whole* child approach that OCS uplifted being employed through the I Promise school.

Closing

Through my research I aimed to explore the results and impact on Black youth's identity development in educational spaces that were intentionally created to humanize, uplift, and

¹⁵⁵ "Home." *I PROMISE School*, ipromiseschool.akronschools.com/.

educate them. I was broadly interested in how this absence or lack of instruction of Black history impacts the self-identity, self-esteem, and self-actualization of Black students in K-12, but this research has allowed me to explore how the *presence* of Black history *and* global histories of the racialized majority (in addition to community engagement and contemporary social issues) in alternative education spaces outside of the traditional public/private schools impacted students' identity formation and racial consciousness. Described by Ericka as a space that was “urgently necessary and didn’t deny [students] the truth about themselves,” OCS was a revolutionary education model that was created to provide a better education for youth.¹⁵⁶ The Oakland Community School experience was certainly one of a kind and though the school only ran for nine years, the impact was considerable on students and families, educators, and community members. The school was “used as a mouthpiece to tell the community to demand better” and “made people think [that they] deserved at least a little more” than the inadequate and chronically unstable social conditions that had been systematically provided.¹⁵⁷

Upon the developing stages of my research, I also became curious about the school’s impact on youth’s sense of social responsibility after being engaged with community beyond the typical space of community programs or traditional civic and community engagement education. Furthermore, in light of the abundance of research that has emerged on the role and power of Black women in the Black Panther Party since the 1990s, I was curious about how their leadership may have influenced OCS schoolchildren during that time (including both Panther cubs and non-Panther cubs). Through critical analysis of archival and secondary research on the Party as well as oral history narratives from students and an educator, my findings infer that Oakland Community School through its pedagogy, ideology, and practices, as well as the

¹⁵⁶ Oral History with Ericka Suzanne September 28, 2020 02:17:54-02:18:34

¹⁵⁷ Oral History with Ericka Suzanne September 28, 2020 02:36:00-02:36:58

presence of Panther women in leadership at the school and in the Party at large influenced the identity formation of young Black girls at the school especially by the cultivation of their racial consciousness, sense of self, and leadership efficacy. This research is especially important in light of the contemporary need in the field of Black girlhood studies to widen explorations into the historical site of Black girlhood and also in light of the rise in criminalization and the characterization of deviance that harms Black youth and especially Black girls in schools. To add, within contemporary times, there has also been the recruitment and dissemination of police/school resource officers in schools. One of the reasons the BPP was created was due to police brutality in Black neighborhoods and they were adamantly against oppressive power structures that not only benefited from capitalism, but these same structures that have also weakened and exploited Black communities. They were pushing back against police brutality in Black communities, but unfortunately the issue has not only remained, but it has also proliferated and metastasized in the different social institutions that exist in these same neighborhoods and make up the infrastructure of the communities, namely schools. Therefore, this research adds perspective to contemporary discussions on what it means for the state's arm of law enforcement such as police officers to permeate into schools. This is interesting because it oftentimes transforms the state-sanctioned violence that occurs in communities into a newly formed tool of violent oppression in schools that disproportionately discriminates against youth on the basis of race and gender.

Limitations

There are six limitations in particular that are important to note with this research: *memory, applications to Black girlhood, identity formation, selection and sample size limits, time constraints, and researcher bias*. Regarding memory, the Oakland Community School closed in

1982 which was almost 38 years ago. It was at this same time that the Black Panther Party dissolved. Although OCS was a memorable community survival program and experience itself, due to the nature of time, some details may not be as exhaustive as others for former educators and students. Due to fact the Black women can shift spaces between their experiences as Black girls in the past and their contemporary lives as women in the present has allowed me to consider how their experiences can be applied within the broader context of the history of Black girlhood. However, although former students were young girls at the time of OCS's existence, they have matured into Black women. Their personal development may impact perceptions and recollections of their experiences as children. The discussion of identity formation is an additional limitation. Identity is very personal and one's understanding of it differs from person to person. Some people are still grappling with their identity many years after their childhood and adolescence, so although the interviewees had a strong grasp of their identities, there should be a cautious analysis when generalizing to the entire population of former OCS students.

Regarding selection and sample size limits, this is an important consideration because there were over 20 instructors and 150+ students who attended Oakland Community School. Only one instructor, who was also a member of the BPP, was interviewed for this project. Two students were Panther cubs and the third student has been on a number of panels about the legacy of OCS in recent years so bias regarding the school's positive impact on students is possible. No outside, non-Black Panther Party affiliated, Oakland community members who served at the school were interviewed. Nor were there any interviewees who were not affiliated with the school but were residents of Oakland during the years it was operating. Additionally, the Black Panther Party organizing efforts in their local communities was not universally accepted by community members regardless of the chapter's location. Due to government intervention and

being targeted by police and the FBI, some community members may have seen the Party's organizing efforts in a less positive light. Time constraints were also a significant limitation. This is due to the project being an undergraduate thesis and the fact that the research has been conducted for less than a year. Additionally, there may be a possible inflation of the school's impact and limited exploration of critiques of the school due to time constraints for research analysis. Due to time constraints as well as the overarching context of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was limited ability to engage further by potentially visiting Oakland to meet a wider pool of former OCS instructors and students as well as Oakland community members who remember OCS. Additionally, the ability to access other archival sources related to the Black Panther Party that were not available online or through digital archives, presented another aspect of how time constraints functioned as a limitation to this research. Lastly, research bias is a necessary limitation as well. Due to a very strong interest in the need to examine and confront the impact of the flawed U.S. education system and how it has room for immense improvement, researcher bias in highlighting the shortcomings of the U.S. education system and alternatives that have been implemented are worth noting.

Future Considerations

Future work includes exploration into how non-BPP affiliated community members, instructors, and students (via their parents) viewed the impact of Oakland Community School in the Oakland community. Second, there is room for widening the sample size of students to get a better idea and more accurate basis for generalization of how the school impacted former students. Third, investigation into how the end of the Party, the close of OCS, and the lingering effects of the direct and indirect violence inflicted upon the Party by the United States government impacted the students. Fourth, consideration of how the school impacted non-Black

students in their identity formation and racial consciousness is worth exploring. Lastly, consideration of how the differing familial/parental influences may have impacted students' departure from the school is notable as well.

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